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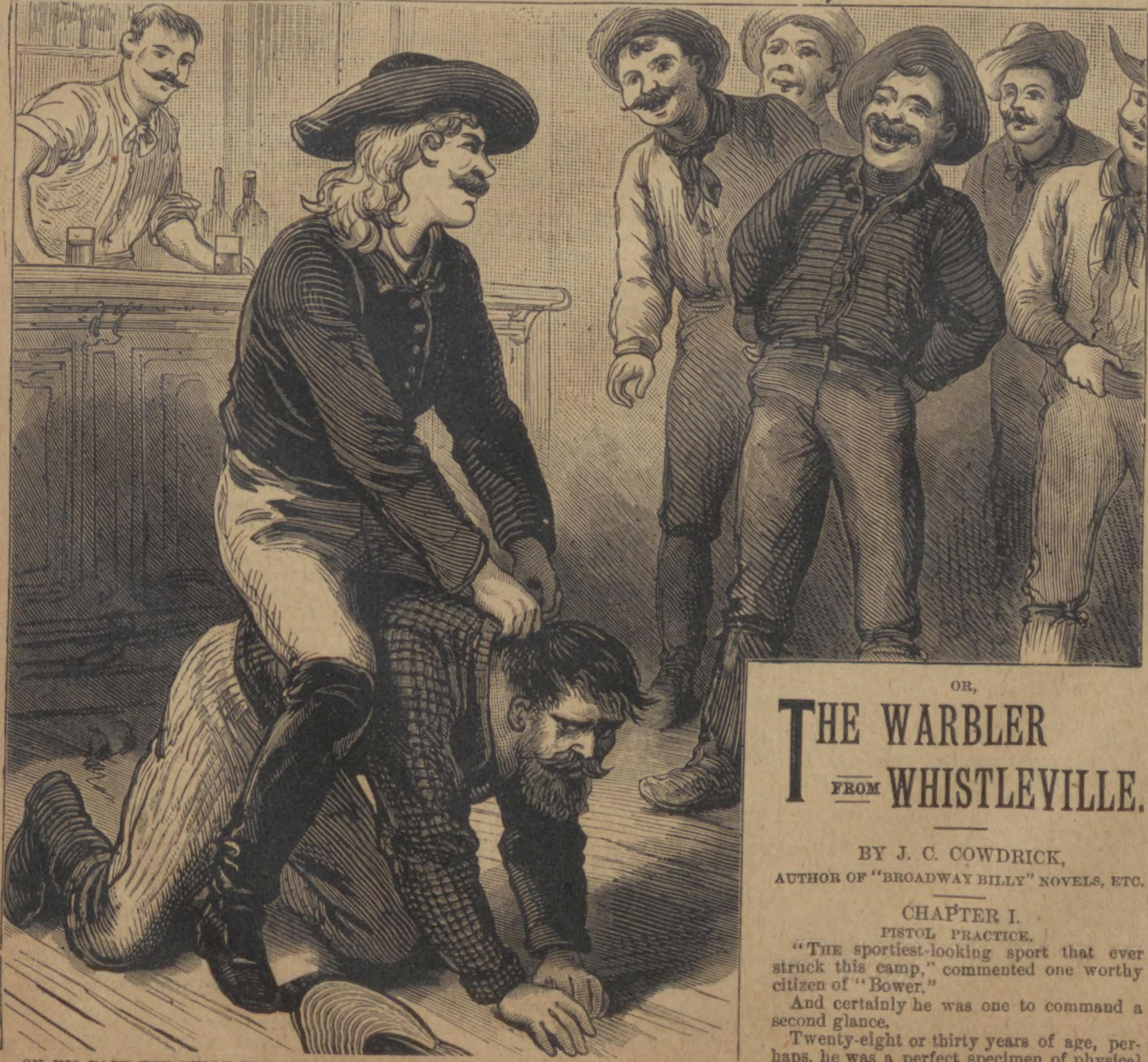
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COWBOY CHARLIE'S DOUBLE



OR,
THE WARBLER
—
FROM WHISTLEVILLE.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PISTOL PRACTICE.

"The sportiest-looking sport that ever struck this camp," commented one worthy citizen of "Bower."

And certainly he was one to command a second glance.

Twenty-eight or thirty years of age, perhaps, he was a perfect specimen of physical manhood.

ON HIS BACK THE BULLY WAS FORCED TO CARRY THE SPORT AROUND THE ROOM.

He was good looking, with clear-cut, regular features, a pair of keen, magnetic dark eyes, a handsome mustache, and hair that fell in a cluster of ringlets upon his shoulders.

A sport, certainly, but he was roughly attired.

Beginning at the bottom, he wore a pair of heavy, high-top boots, into which the legs of a pair of canvas trousers were folded. His upper half was incased in a knit jacket, closely buttoned down the front. On top rested a broad-brimmed slouch hat.

There was no sign of a weapon anywhere, and yet this camp of Bower was a place where every citizen carried at least one gun in sight.

This stranger had strolled, unannounced, into the Sawdust Saloon.

He had become the center of attraction immediately, having greeted the crowd in a hearty manner, while he took a calm survey of the interior.

Comments were made, aside, of which the one with which our story opens is a fair sample, and this was offered as the sport strode carelessly to the bar and called for a tonic.

"You ar' jes' right, he aire, Bowleg Ben," another agreed. "But, say, what is Horsehide Harker goin' ter do? Thar' is goin' ter be trouble hyer, I'm afeerd."

"Et looks like et, Blue Bill, fer sartain."

The man who claimed their attention was a great, big fellow, fully six feet three in height, and large in proportion, clad in rough striped trousers and checked shirt. And he wore, besides, the conventional slouch hat and "stogies."

This fellow was moving toward the end of the bar, with his hand on a gun at his hip.

The stranger did not seem to notice him.

"Do you furnish checks with this stuff?" the sport asked of the man behind the bar.

"Checks?" repeated the bartender.

"That was the word I used, sir."

"I don't savvy."

"Then you don't give any, of course. I thought maybe you furnished something in the way of checks on the undertaker. But maybe this stuff isn't the genuine forty-rod?"

Some of the crowd laughed at the sally, but the fellow denominated Horsehide Harker only frowned.

The sport poured some of the "p'izen," and, taking up the glass, he held it to the light on the tips of his fingers, as if to feast his eyes before he offended his stomach.

He was on the point of turning to speak to the crowd, when something remarkable happened.

The sharp crack of a revolver was heard.

Simultaneously the glass in the sport's fingers was shattered into a thousand fragments, and the liquor was spattered everywhere.

The shot had been fired by Horsehide Harker from the end of the bar where he had taken up his position, and instinctively the crowd leaped back, expecting a "circus" forthwith.

To their great surprise, however, the stranger did not appear to notice that anything unusual had taken place.

Whatever else he might be, he was certainly a man of nerve.

It could not be noticed that he had so much as winked, and he did not even cast a look in the direction whence the bullet had come.

Tossing the bottom of the broken glass, which still remained in his fingers, into the nearest spittoon, he coolly asked for another, which he proceeded to fill as he had done the first.

Again he held it up to the light, as if tempting another shot from the fine shooter.

He had not long to wait.

Another shot was fired, and again the glass was shattered to atoms by the unerring bullet, while the crowd looked on with bated breath.

Not a muscle of the sport's hand or face was seen to move. Such extreme coolness had never before been witnessed in the Sawdust Saloon. It was as if the man was oblivious to it all.

"Durn me ef he ain't cool!" exclaimed Blue Bill.

"You ar' jes' more'n right he is cool," agreed Bowleg Ben. "An' et is good he is, fer Horsehide looks ugly."

The sport held the remnant of the glass in his fingers for a moment or two, just where he had been holding it, without a tremor, and then tossed it into the spittoon with the first.

"Another glass, please," he requested.

It was provided.

"Somebody here appears to be pretty handy with a gun," the sport added. "I hope it amuses you, my friend."

As he said this he merely glanced in the direction of the burly "bullwhacker," proceeding immediately to pour out the third potion, and he added:

"Now, my friend, you have had your fun, let me have mine."

With that, he lifted the glass toward his mouth, but before he could touch it to his lips a third shot was fired.

Yet again the glass was splintered, and this time the sport gave a slight jerk that seemed to indicate that the bullet had touched him, but no time was given to ascertain.

Somehow, from somewhere, a brace of guns leaped into his hands, and two shots were fired in rapid succession.

It was over before the crowd knew what had happened.

The "bullwhacker" was seen to clap both hands to the sides of his head, and he let out a yell that would have shamed a Sioux.

And, while every eye was upon Horsehide, the sport put away his weapons as dexterously as he had brought them to light, and appeared as one of the spectators.

"What is the matter with the gentleman?" he inquired.

The crowd had been inclined to laugh at the antics the "bullwhacker" was cutting up, and this caused the outburst.

The big, whiskered fellow was howling and vociferating wildly, and this served to enrage him the more. He dropped his hands from his head and reached for a gun.

And then it was discovered that a neat scallop had been cut in each of his ears by the sport's bullets!

He seemed to forget that he had dropped his "howitzer."

"I'll show ye what's the matter, cuss ye!" he bellowed. "I'll pay ye back fer what ye have done to me!"

"And he'll do et, too," averred Bowleg Ben, aside, to Blue Bill.

"Yes, et's ther sport's life, now, unless some of us chips in," Blue Bill agreed with him.

"Why, I thought the score was about even, my friend," coolly remarked the sport. "As long as you didn't harm me, I did not object to your having a little fun; but that last shot of yours skinned my finger, and I thought it was about time for me to stop you."

He held up his hand as he spoke, showing a finger that was bleeding a trifle.

"I'm going o stop you, cuss ye!" was the angry bellow. "Whar' is my gun?"

He looked around for it.

The crowd was getting out of the way with all haste possible, some of the men making a mad scramble for the nearest doors and windows.

It certainly looked as if there was going to be a little Balaklava.

Still the sport was like ice.

"Hold on a minnit, Horsehide," suddenly sang out the bartender. "Let ther gent pay fer his drinks before you finish him off."

"Pay for what I did not get?" queried the sport. "I guess not. My friend, His Whiskers, there, will settle the score. He had all the fun."

"I'll show ye who ye are a-callin' names!" bellowed the "bullwhack." "Don't you worry 'bout pay fer ther drinks, Dannie McCoy; we'll mebby find enough in his clothes before we plant him."

All this in a few brief seconds.

The fellow by this time discovered his gun, and he made a leap for it and caught it up.

When he turned to use it, however, lo! he was looking straight into the cold tubes of the sport's brace, which had leaped to hand as if of their own volition.

"Better go slow," the sport gently warned. "This thing commenced in fun, but it is likely to get down to grim earnest if you carry it too far, and the good Mumbo Jumbo help you if it does! Better go slow!"

"Say, who ther doose aire you, anyhow?" the big fellow demanded.

"Who am I? Why, I am called Willing William, the Warbler from Whistleville. And I'm a cherub when I sing, you bet!"

CHAPTER II.

TAMING A "TERROR."

Already the stranger had the sympathies of the crowd.

Horsehide Harker had been cock of the walk from time out of mind, and was heartily feared and cordially hated.

It did the denizens of Bower good to see him thus defied, and more than one man in the crowd quietly made the resolve within himself that he would chip in on the sport's side.

The words last quoted, spoken in a droll fashion, tickled the crowd, and further nettled the "bullwhacker."

"Willing William, hey?" the latter sneered.

"And not only willing, but ready," the sport added, further.

"Ready and willin' ter run, ef et comes to a pinch, I suppose. Oh, yas!"

"Willing to do my little part in anything that comes to hand," the sport corrected. "And I'm just as ready as willing, too."

"Waal, I am ready ter eat you up; aire you ready ter be ett? I am goin' ter jest everlastin'ly chaw ye to sassage an' swaller ye, an' then I'll go an' puke ye up to ther dogs!"

"What a terrible fellow you are!"

This was said in such a comical way that the crowd roared.

The "bullwhacker" bristled up the more, and took a step forward, even in the face of the threatening weapons.

"Drop them ar' guns!" he ordered, in a frightful bellow. "Drop 'em, I tell ye, or by ther road ter ruin ef I don't sallyvate ye!"

"Proceed!" was the cool invitation.

But the fellow didn't. His ears were burning like fire, a reminder that the stranger was no novice with his revolvers.

He glared at the good-looking, smiling sport, utterly helpless, even though he had a weapon in hand, and was no slouch of a shot himself. The other fellow had the "drop," and that made all the difference in the world.

"Why don't you sail in?" the sport taunted him.

"Cuss ye! Give me half a show, an' see how blamed quick I will sail in!" he

cried. "You have got ther bulge on me this minnit."

"That is a failing I have, my friend. But what kind of a show do you want? I am disposed to be reasonable, even if this is trouble of your own making. I like to be accommodating."

"Put up them 'ar guns an' meet me man ter man."

"All right; I will do that."

"Wull, why don't ye?"

"And give you the opportunity to deposit a lump of lead in my inner person. Oh, no; thank you, not any."

"But I won't do that."

"Maybe you wouldn't. But you are a stranger to me, and I am not going to trust you very far, my friend. Hand your gun over to the bartender, and your knife, too, and I will do the same."

"You are too mighty partic'lar, cuss ye!"

"Have to be. I have cut my eyeteeth, and they shed their skins long ago. I am somewhat acquainted with gentlemen of your stripe, my friend."

"Mebby you aire, an mebbe ye only think ye alre," cried the fellow, as he slammed his revolver down on the bar, following it with a long knife which he pulled out of his boot. "You'll be better acquainted with me in about two minutes, see ef you ain't!"

"And I'll make an effort to introduce myself to you. That all the weapons you have got about you?"

"Yas, that's all."

"I'll take your word for it. Here, Danie—as I have heard you called—take care of my persuaders, too, for a few minutes, will you?"

The sport put his guns on the bar, but at the same time he had an eye upon Mr. Harker in order not to allow him a chance to play any trick upon him. He was satisfied that he had no other weapon.

"Now, sir," he invited, "open the ball."

"That's what I intend ter do, an' close et, too," roared the terrible fellow. "I ruther hate ter spile ye'r beauty, but I couldnt take your sass an' not give ye what ye seem ter be itchin' fer."

"No apology needed, my friend. Beggin."

"Et must be that you don't know who I am, sonny."

"That's right; neither do I care."

"More sass! D'ye hear what he says, boyees? Won't et be right an' proper fer me ter give him a course o' sprouts? I opine et will. Sonny, my cognomen aire Hank Harker, surnamed Horsehide fer short, because I have got ther toughest skin an' ther biggest neck in seven counties. D'ye hear?"

"Yes, I hear. It seems I have run up against a cactus burr."

"Wull, you ar' likely ter find out that ye have, 'fore I git done with ye. I am comin' fer ye now!"

"Come on!"

The sport stood cool and calm, and the big fellow put up his arms and pranced up to the scratch with all confidence in his own prowess.

The crowd formed a circle, eager to see the fun.

"I hate ter do et; hon'st, now, I hate ter do et," the big fellow declared, as he brandished his terrible fist. "Shall I let him off easy, boyees, ef he will treat ther house?"

"You can't get out of it that way, my friend," spoke up the sport. "You have pushed this thing too far to draw out—"

"Draw out! Great tom cats!"

That insinuation made a tiger of him in a moment, and he sprang to the attack with a tiger's fury.

His huge fists lunged forth like stones from a catapult, but to his amaze he struck nothing more solid than the vacant air,

with the result that he nearly dislocated both arms.

The next he knew he was gathering himself up from under a table.

A clip from one of the sport's white fists had toppled him over in a way that surprised the whole assembly.

There was a silly look upon the face of the "bullwhack" as he got up, and the taunts of the crowd were hurled at him from every direction. He glared around like a wounded bull at bay.

"Who hit me that clip?" he demanded. "Show me ther man what done et?"

"Ha! ha! Et was ther sport done et," some one informed him.

"That's a lie!" the "bullwhack" roared. "Some other feller chipped in an' hit me with a bottle! I didn't set out ter fight ther hull crowd!"

This brought down the house.

"Never mind the crowd—give your attention to me," spoke up the stranger, in a mild and smiling manner. "You set out to have some fun at my expense, and I don't want to cheat you out of any of it."

With another bellow the enraged man sprang to the mark again.

This was more than he could stand; he must crush this stranger or be forever disgraced in the eyes of his fellow citizens.

He struck out with even more fury than before, but his blows were brushed off with ease, and then a telling pit! pat! fell upon his face and he staggered back and almost lost his balance.

The crowd began to whoop and cheer wildly.

Regardless of everything, the rage-crazed "bullwhacker" rushed upon his intended victim, with the intention of closing with him.

If he could do that, he thought, he would have no trouble in doing the rest, for he was a man of great strength. But, had he but known it, he had tackled an exceptionally tough customer.

Clip! Biff!

Away the big fellow went, trying hard to save himself from a fall, but he lost his balance and fell crashing under a table, while the crowd fairly danced in their delight. This was the greatest event the camp of Bower had ever known.

"Give me a gun!" called Horsehide, as he made haste to get up. "Give me a ripper! Give me anything, so long as I kin lay him out with et! Cuss ye! I am after yer gore now, in earnest!"

"I haven't a doubt of it," returned the sport, calmly. "Come on and take a sample, if you can get it."

At him the big fellow sprang, and the sport allowed him to close.

A grunt of satisfaction was heard, at first, but this was quickly followed by grunts of another description.

Try as he would, he could not throw his adversary, and in a few moments his breathing began to grow labored. And then it was that the sport took the aggressive, picking the huge gladiator up and flopping him down, cuffing him right and left and tweaking his nose until he made him bellow for quarter; and finally he forced the terrible Horsehide to carry him around the room on his back, on hands and knees, to the uproarious delight of the multitude.

CHAPTER III.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY.

Just how much further this horse play would have been carried cannot be determined.

When the fun was about at its height, the door opened and a heavy tread was

heard on the floor, and every eye was turned in that direction.

A man was coming into the room on horseback, a fellow in rough attire, but having about him something of the air of a dare-devil sport. He wore a big hat, had long hair, and his belt bristled with weapons.

His left hand held loosely the rein, while his right rested upon the handle of a weapon.

He halted just within the door, and looked about him.

Willing William was astride of Horsehide Harker, with both hands gripped on the back of his collar, and upon the entrance of the horseman he had sung out: "Whoa!"

The two sports looked at each other, the one mounted upon a horse, in fact, as described, and the other upon a make-believe animal. And as the newcomer took in the situation, he joined in the laughter.

"I see you got here first," he remarked to Willing William.

"Well, yes, it seems I did," and the latter gave the horse-rider a look of questioning surprise.

"And you seem to be enjoying yerself, too."

"Yes; I am playing circus. Say! how will you trade, my broncho for your pony?"

This served to make the crowd burst out in laughter afresh, and Horsehide Harker made an effort to dislodge his rider and get upon his feet.

"I guess I don't care to dicker," rejoined the newcomer. "I see your broncho is a bucker, and I have no use for one of that kind."

Which remark caused the crowd to laugh the louder.

"Yes, he is inclined to buck a little, but you see he is harmless," remarked Willing William, as he brought the "bullwhacker" again under submission. "He set out to ride me, at first, and I am just breaking him in."

"That is the way of it, hey? Well, go an' have your fun out, and then we will attend to our little business."

Again did the first arrival look at the newcomer questioningly.

"Well, the fun is about over, now," he observed. "Or at any rate I am willing to let up on the fellow if he will promise to behave himself better in the future. What say, Mr. Horsetail?"

Horsehide had not been silent all this time.

He had been cursing roundly, calling down all manner of anathemas upon the head of his tormentor.

"I give in fer this time," he growled. "You have got ther best o' me, 'count o' my sprainin' my arm; but I will have et out wi' ye some other time, that I swear by all that's livin'!"

"All right; I will let up, on one condition."

"What is et?"

"That you take oath that you will not murder me unawares."

"See hyer, I ain't that kind of a dog, I ain't! I'll give ye due notice when I git ready fer business."

"All right; up with you, then! But, the Lordy help you, if I catch you at any trick!"

"Yas, an' ther own Nick help you! You will never leave Bower alive!"

The fellow got upon his feet in a very humiliated and shamefaced manner indeed, and those in the crowd who had been laughing loudest were now remarkable for their silence.

Willing William stepped to the bar and recovered his weapons.

"Now, sir," he demanded, turning to

the newcomer, "who are you and what is your business with me?"

"Mean to pretend that you don't know me, do you?"

"No pretense about it. I don't know you. Never saw you before in my life, that I am aware of."

"Ha! ha! Well, now, that is pretty good, I must say. But that is only because I have got a point on you, that's all."

"A point? And what is it?"

"I have got my hand on a gun, you see."

The other had put his weapons out of sight immediately on taking them from the bartender's keeping.

"You are away off the trail, my friend," Willing William declared, earnestly. "It must be that you mistake me for somebody else, for you are a stranger to me, that is positive."

"It won't work, Cowboy Charlie. Where's your pony?"

"In front of the hotel, just down the street."

"Well, go and mount, and we'll finish it out here in the street."

Willing William, and the crowd as well, looked more surprised than ever at this.

"Well, your invitation is certainly a cordial one," the sport declared, "but I have to insist that you are making a mistake. What manner of meeting do you desire?"

"One to the death, as you well know. It is your life or mine, Cowboy Charlie. If you will not come out, I will settle with you right here. I mean business, and you shall not escape me, now that we have met."

This had the genuine ring about it.

"Well, you seem to mean business, that is true," Willing William admitted. "I don't want to stand in the way of your having a little fun, but I always like to know what I am fighting for, where I have to fight. I insist that you have made a mistake in your man."

"Then you want to make me think that you are not Charlie Holton?"

"I wish I could make you understand it so, for it might be valuable to you in the long run. Who are you?"

"It is not necessary to tell you, but I'll inform these citizens of Bower. I am Henry Nutter, better known on the range as Pony Hen. Maybe you have heard of me?"

It seemed that some of those present had.

"And what is your difficulty with the man you call Cowboy Charlie?" further inquired the sport.

"Confound it! do you take me for a fool? Do you think you can make a fool of me here before this crowd? I'll give you just one minute to git your pony!"

The man drew from his belt the gun upon which his hand had been resting, and there was a glint of determination in his eyes.

"Well, you seem to mean it, and will not be convinced."

"You can bet your life I mean it!"

"Well, if you are going to force me to play this Cowboy Charlie's part, you can bet your life that I will play it for all I am worth!"

"I expect that!"

"And you may, possibly, get more than you anticipate."

"I will take my chances of that. If you can get there first, so be it."

"Look 'e hyer, stranger."

It was Blue Bill who spoke up.

"Well, what is it?"

"Ef ye want to see a sample of this sport's fine shootin', jest fix yer gaze onto Horsehide's ears thar'."

He pointed to Horsehide Harker, who was busy with his slight wounds, trying

to stop the bleeding and get some of the blood off of his face and neck, and the newcomer looked surprised.

"You did that?" he demanded of the sport.

"Yes; gave him something to remember me by," was the answer. "Next time he will sample the package before he opens it, perhaps."

The newcomer looked a little disconcerted.

"I tell you again that I am not the man you are looking for, my friend," the sport added. "I am Willing William, the Warbler from Whistleville; a pilgrim and a stranger here, if you will only believe it."

Pony Hen looked at the sport as if he found it hard to believe that he could have made such a mistake.

"It don't seem possible," he mused.

"But it is the fact, nevertheless," the sport assured. "Still, if you are going to insist, I am willing to oblige you and take Cowboy Charlie's place, for the time being; not only willing, but ready."

At that moment there came another heavy clatter of hoofs upon the floor, causing the building to tremble, and every eye turned to greet another horseman who had come dashing into the room. He had a gun in hand, and instantly Pony Hen wheeled about to face him, similarly armed.

CHAPTER IV.

INTERRUPTING THE PROCEEDINGS.

Truly, the camp of Bower was having its share of excitement on this night.

Night it was, as perhaps we have thus far omitted to state, but it was a night of full and brilliant moon, and the street was almost as light as by day.

There was none to admire the beauties of nature, however, for something of more momentous import was just then upon the tapis. Since the arrival of Willing William, there had not been a break in the ebullition.

And now the climax appeared to have been reached.

Every eye was upon the two horsemen, as they confronted each other, and for a moment no one moved.

It was a momentary tableau, and one of a thrilling character, but it was one that could not last long, and the reaction was apprehended by all. All knew what this meeting meant.

The words of Pony Hen had sufficiently explained.

Willing William stood ready to play whatever part might fall to him, with an eye askance upon Horsehide Harker at the same time.

"Well, Hen Nutter, here I am!" spoke the latest arrival, in cold tones.

"Yes, and here I am, too, curse you!" was the grated retort. "Will you have it here or outside?"

"Just as you please."

Each held his gun ready for action, and provided that they were equally expert, neither had the advantage.

"Outside, then!" decided Pony Hen. "No use of my dirtying this floor with your blood."

"You are quite thoughtful, truly. But it is all the same to me, Pony Hen; I hate to put anybody to inconvenience. What is your programme? I am here by your invitation."

"We'll take our places a couple of hundred yards apart, and then make a dash toward each other, firing as we come, and the best man will win the fight. If you have got anything better to offer, let's hear from you."

"That suits me."

"Come on, then."

"Hold on just a moment!" interposed Willing William, stepping forward.

The latest arrival cast a glance at him, and gave a start of surprise. He saw in him almost his own personal duplicate.

Then, too, for the first time, the crowd at large took note of the likeness, and the mistake of Pony Hen was understood. The likeness between the two men was certainly striking.

"Well, what is it?" Cowboy Charlie demanded.

"As we happen to look something alike, I came pretty near having to fight this battle for you."

"Glad I got here in time to prevent that, sir. I don't want any one to take any risk upon himself on my account. I am able to do my own fighting. But you have more to say?"

"You look able to take care of Number One, certainly," the Warbler agreed. "I was going to ask if this couldn't be settled some other way?"

"Look hyer," cried Pony Hen. "You keep out, will ye?"

"Yes, keep out," added Holton. "This matter may as well be settled now as any other time."

"Yes, but is there no other way by which—"

"No other way at all," cried Pony. "D'y'e hear what I say? It is his life or mine, and no monkey work about it!"

"You see how it is," observed Cowboy Charlie. "He is bound to force it, and I have made up my mind to have it out and done with. Lead the way, Pony, and may you get what you want to give me."

"It will be a fair fight."

"That is understood."

With that Pony Hen rode out of the saloon, to the great relief of the proprietor thereof, and Cowboy Charlie followed.

And after them surged the crowd.

Whistling William found himself close to Bowleg Ben as they passed out, and he inquired:

"Who are these fellows?"

"Must be ranchers from over the range," was the reply.

"They are strangers here, then?"

"Yas; ther ranchers mostly pat'nize Butte City, which is more in their way."

"I see."

"They seem ter mean biz."

"Yes, they certainly do. I should like to know more about the matter."

"Yas, an' so would I. Et wouldn't surprise me a bit ef they both got hit hard, fer some of them fellers is tall on ther shoot."

"It is quite likely they will do considerable damage; that was why I wanted to have them settle it some other way. But it is their own picnic, and I hope they will enjoy it."

"Some of ther boyees think mebby that last feller is your brother, ye look so much alike."

"No, it is only a coincidence; never saw him before in my life. But they are about ready, I guess, and now the fun will begin. Got your life insured against accidents?"

The two horsemen had galloped a little distance apart, the one up the street and the other down, and now had stopped.

They were, at a guess, about a hundred and fifty yards apart.

"Are you ready?" sung out Pony.

"Yes, I am ready," was the response.

"Then let 'er go!"

All Bower was out to witness the encounter.

Both sides of the highway were black with people, who stood as far back as possible against the buildings.

The moonlight fell into the street in the

direction of its length, and in consequence there was no shadow on either side, a circumstance most favorable.

Silence prevailed in the crowds, save for the hum of low-spoken comments, and only the voices of the duelists actually broke the stillness.

But, immediately following the last words of Pony Hen, a new sound broke upon the ear.

It was the clatter of a horse's hoofs.

All heard it, and it had the effect to stay for a moment the terrible business of the hour.

Every face turned in the direction whence the sound came, and in a few moments the outlines of a horse and rider were seen coming up the street like the wind.

Louder the sound, nearer the speeding horse, and then a woman's cry rang out loud and clear upon the night:

"Charlie—Henry! Stop! Stay your hands!"

An imprecation was heard to fall from the lips of Pony Hen, and an ejaculation from Cowboy Charlie.

The rider was a woman, now plainly seen, and she dashed on and into the open space between the two foes who had been on the point of opening fire upon each other when she was heard coming.

The neck and shoulders of her horse were flecked with foam, and the animal appeared to be all but ready to drop.

She first turned toward Nutter, who was nearest in the direction of her approach, but when she saw who it was she dashed on to where Holton was waiting, and the crowd stood silent, as if witnessing a play.

"Stop!" called out Pony. "Stop, Nell Thornton, or I will stop you!"

"I defy you!" was thrown back to him, in full, round tone, as the woman dashed on.

"Stop! I warn you!"

With a couple of bounds Willing William was out into the arena.

"If you fire upon that woman, sir, I will take a hand in this game myself!" and his voice rang out like a bugle for clearness, while the moonlight fell upon a brace of guns in hand ready for business.

If Nutter had intended to shoot, he did not do so, and the new-comer reached the point where Cowboy Charlie stood, and stopped.

Immediately some excited words were exchanged between them, but not so as to be overheard, and meantime Pony Hen was firing an angry retort at Willing William for his interference.

"Blaze away, if you want to include me in the game," the Warbler invited. "I am ready to defend a woman, every time, and willing to accept the consequence. I have a notion that I can make it interesting for you unless you make a bull's-eye the first fire!"

CHAPTER V.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

The citizens of Bower began to awaken to the fact that there was an incipient tragedy on hand.

And yet they stood as if helpless to do anything to avert it. First, every man had individual regard for his own good health, and then there were some who cared only to see the "fun."

Of them all, Willing William was the only one who made bold to face the danger at the important moment.

His peculiar nickname was certainly no misnomer.

Pony Hen had threatened to fire upon him, if he did not immediately get back out of range, which had called forth the sport's defiance.

"This is no affair of yours," Pony Hen

sharply rejoined. "If you are going to make it so I will attend to you as soon as I have finished with this other fellow. I didn't come here to fight the whole camp."

"I did not chip in until you threatened that woman."

"I did not mean to harm her."

"How could I know that? I had to judge of your intention by your words."

"Well, judge me now in the same manner, then, and get back out of this. We came here to fight, and we are going to fight!"

Just then the woman's voice rang out.

"Henry Nutter!" she called.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Pony Hen.

"This fight shall not proceed; I forbid it!"

"Can't help what you forbid; that is what we are here for."

"But I tell you it shall not proceed! You cannot fire without danger of killing me!"

"You must get out of the way, then."

"That I will not do."

"And is that the kind of a man you are, Cowboy Charlie, to take shelter behind a petticoat?"

This in a tone of banter.

"I have sought no shelter!" rang out the voice of Holton. "Nell, get out of the way and let me meet him. This thing has got to be settled, one way or the other, here and now."

"Hearken to me, Hen Nutter!" the young woman called. "You have nothing to gain by this mad business. I would never marry you under any circumstances, and if you should kill Cowboy Charlie I would kill you! Will you not see the folly of this fight?"

"Then, by Heavens! if you will not marry me you shall never wed Cowboy Charlie! Out of the way!"

"Yes, let us settle it!" urged Holton.

"What if you be killed?" asked the young woman, in lower tone, yet loud enough to be heard.

"I will take the chances of that. There can be neither peace nor safety, as the matter stands."

"And you risk not only your life, but mine."

"You must get out of the way."

"You fail to understand. If he kills you then he shall fight me!"

"Never! Let me meet him, and I will take good care to put that out of the question."

"But you know what a shot he is—"

"What are you going to do, Cowboy Charlie?" called out Pony. "If you mean business, come on and show yourself a man! It looks as if you are willing to be protected!"

"Curse you! You know better than that. How can we carry out our plan if Miss Thornton persists in remaining between us?"

"She must be removed by force."

"Let no one attempt that," warned the young woman. "I have not ridden forty miles to be balked in my purpose."

"You will not get out of the way, then?" cried Pony.

"I will not! You shall not fight!"

"That is for us to say. I think we are both expert enough with our guns to avoid hitting you. Cowboy Charlie, look to yourself!"

With that Pony touched his horse and dashed forward.

"He means it!" cried Holton. "Out of the way, Nell!"

"Never! He is running to sure death!"

Pony fired a shot, purposely high, perhaps with the hope that it would cause the young woman to waver in her intention.

But, if that was his thought, he did not

know the girl thoroughly. She wheeled, facing him, and her right arm came up to a level with a pistol in her grasp, and she ordered:

"Stop, or I fire!"

To shield her, Cowboy Charlie dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and dashed forward, but the young woman was quicker than either of the men.

Her pistol spoke, and Pony Hen reeled and fell out of the saddle!

"He would have it," the young woman cried. "He had fair warning, but he was deaf to it. Charlie, forgive me, but I could not withhold the shot when I saw your life in peril."

She rode up to Cowboy Charlie, with hand outstretched, and he grasped it eagerly.

"You took a fearful risk, Nell," he said.

"It was for you."

"Hooray for the gal!" some fellow in the crowd proposed.

The proposition took immediately, and three rousing cheers were given with a hearty will.

Meantime, men had run out to the assistance of the fallen duelist, while others caught his horse, and it looked as if the excitement of the night was at an end; but such was not the case.

Still another new arrival came dashing up the street to the scene of action.

"Clear the way, there, citizens!" a woman's voice shouted. "Out of the road! I am going to have a hand in this game, you bet!"

And forward she came, with utter recklessness.

In the brilliant moonlight it could be seen that she was a handsome woman in the early blossom of life.

She was jauntily attired, wearing a sombrero, a jacket, a short skirt, and leggings that buttoned with buttons almost innumerable. In her right hand was a gun, and another gleamed in her belt.

"What! Am I too late for the ball?" she cried, as she drew rein.

"The dance has just ended," answered Bowleg Ben, who was ever ready to speak out.

"Heavens! Is he dead? But, which one got the dose?"

"The fellow called Pony."

"Thank God!"

She had leaned far over in her saddle, trying to get a sight of the face of the man on the ground, but now she straightened up instantly and looked around.

It needed but a moment for her to take in the situation, and she rode forward the few yards to where Cowboy Charlie and Nell Thornton were standing, her pistol yet in hand, as if she had use for it.

Suddenly she drew rein with a jerk.

"You here?" she exclaimed.

"As you see, Sport Helen," answered Nell Thornton.

"And you mean to disregard the warning I gave you? You mean to defy me! I think we will settle it, while the chance offers."

Cowboy Charlie wheeled suddenly and rode between them.

"None of this!" he cried. "We have had excitement enough for one night, ladies."

"Don't you interfere, Cowboy Charlie!" warned she called Sport Helen. "I am resolved to possess you or kill you, one or the other. This hussy shall never claim you!"

"I do claim him, though!" retorted the other young woman, defiantly. "What is more, I am his choice, and I have just saved his life, perhaps. I will kill you before I will permit you to come between us! I will serve you the same as I have just served Pony Hen."

"Then it was your shot that laid him out, was it?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, I am greatly obliged to you for doing what I hoped to do myself, but that does not alter our standing in the least."

"I tell you both that this must stop," spoke Cowboy Charlie, with determination. "It is bad enough when men fall out in this way, but for women to play such a part is shameful! You shall desist!"

"Then you would deny us the rights which you are quick to take to yourselves, under like circumstances, would you?" demanded Sport Helen. "We'll see about that, I fancy! Nell Thornton, I give you a fair chance, and it shall be your life or mine, at once! Are you ready?"

CHAPTER VI.

UNWILLING COMPROMISE.

Great was the excitement now. A horseback pistol duel between men was something not witnessed every day in the year, but here promised to be something ten times rarer—yes, a hundred times!

Meanwhile, the horse of Willing William, which he had left standing before the one hotel of the camp, the Grand Royal, had become restless, and the Warbler had leaped into the saddle.

On his arrival in the camp he had merely tossed the long bridle over a post, cowboy fashion.

He rode in the direction of the trio.

As he came up, Sport Helen had just given utterance to the words last quoted.

Willing William touched his horse and darted in between the two, where Cowboy Charlie was doing his best to keep them apart.

"This will never do, ladies!" he said, in a sprightly manner. "It is bad enough for men to take up arms against one another occasionally, but we cannot allow beauty to follow the example of the beast."

Both looked at him in amazement.

From him they looked at Cowboy Charlie, and their astonishment was plainly depicted upon their faces.

In the moonlight, which is ever deceptive at best, the likeness was even more striking than it had been in the saloon. Sport Helen, however, was the more puzzled of the two.

Nell Thornton knew, of course, which of the two was her lover, but in the mind of her rival there was a doubt.

"Who are you?" the girl sport demanded.

"Willing William, at your service," was the response.

And as he said it the Warbler doffed his hat in a gallant manner.

"This business must be nipped in the bud, sir," spoke Cowboy Charlie, at the same time, in undertone.

"Willing William?" the girl sport repeated.

"The Warbler from Whistleville, so-called," the sport supplemented.

"Name enough, certainly."

"And whom have I the pleasure of addressing?"

"That does not matter. Are you aware that you are interfering with business?"

"I am aware that I do not mean to allow such business as this to proceed if I can help it, fair lady."

"You cannot prevent. Nell Thornton, are you ready?"

"Yes, I am ready—"

"No, you shall not fight, Nell!" ordered Cowboy Charlie. "Helen, what madness is this?"

"The same kind of madness that existed between you and Pony Hen," was the

answer, promptly given. "We both cannot possess you, and hence one of us must go under, you see."

Never spoke fair woman with more coolness.

"Yes, but I could choose but one, don't you see," reminded Cowboy Charlie.

"And that one must be me," the girl sport said, firmly. "If you marry her I will kill you!"

There could be no doubting that she meant what she said.

"Yes, but there are two of us, don't you see," here put in Willing William, pleasantly. "I am willing to do what I can to effect a compromise, and I'm just as ready as willing, too."

"You have an amazing amount of the tinkling cymbal in your makeup, anyhow."

"Which is only another name for sounding brass, eh?"

"That was my gentle allusion."

"I saw it."

"But brass does not pass current with me, sir. Come, now, you are only delaying the procession. Get out of the way and let us settle this between ourselves, which we are both determined to do, anyhow."

At the same time Cowboy Charlie had been talking in low tones with the other young woman.

She could have been easily persuaded to desist, but she would not tamely submit to the taunts of her rival, and the threat Sport Helen had made against Holton spurred her on.

"But we can't allow it, don't you see," persisted Willing William. "I am the most willing fellow you ever saw in your life, fair lady, and usually just as ready as willing, too; but in a case of this kind I must draw the line. Feminine loveliness is not so plentiful here that we can permit a single specimen of it to run the risk of spoliation."

In spite of herself, the girl sport had to admire the Warbler.

The sport had a horse that understood his will by the slightest token, and it had gradually edged the animal of the girl sport away from her rival by a constant restless motion under the sport's touch.

"How are you going to prevent what you say you cannot permit?" the young woman demanded.

"By force, if necessary."

"Ha! ha! Suppose I try an exchange of shots with you first, then, just to clear the way to the real object of my hatred?"

"You cannot mean that."

"Why not?"

"You have nothing against me, and I am only trying to serve you for your own good."

"You are nothing to me, sir, and if you will stand in my path, you must be removed. It is my intention to fight with that bold hussy, here and now. Pray get out of my way, sir."

She gathered up her rein with her left hand, faced her horse upon the sport, and in her right hand was her ready weapon.

Willing William looked her squarely in the eyes.

"You might be something to me, though," he said, in lower tone. "What is the use of your taking this chance of losing your life? If I am nothing to you, one thing is certain."

"And what is that?"

"That you are not going to face the danger of a bullet unless you keep your threat and remove me from your path first."

"And are you going to make no move to defend yourself?"

"Not the slightest. I leave the matter

right in your hands; so, if you want to remove me, do so."

She was a woman, with a woman's heart, after all!

Thrusting her pistol into her belt, she rode forward the couple of paces that separated them, and offered her hand.

Willing William took it with greatest willingness, giving it a warm pressure that caused the blood to mount to her cheeks, and he fondled the plump hand for a moment in his palm before releasing it.

"I am glad you see the matter in the sensible light," the sport averred. "With a bullet in your head or heart, which you were as likely to receive as to administer, you would be out of the race entirely. There are more ways than one to kill a cat, to use so homely an expression."

"It is merely deferred, perhaps, sir," assumed the girl sport.

"I hope not."

While this was being said, Cowboy Charlie and Nell Thornton were talking together in low tones.

Holton kept between the young woman and her rival, and while the crowd could not overhear what passed between them, it would have been plain to a close observer that his argument prevailed.

As soon as Willing William released Sport Helen's hand she raised her voice and called out to her rival:

"It is no use trying, this deal, but we'll meet again."

"We will, if you force it," was the prompt response. "You will show good sense by retiring with as good grace as possible, seeing that you have nothing to win here."

All that Willing William had done was undone in an instant by these words.

Sport Helen felt the sting keenly, and, jerking a gun from her belt, she fired, but at the critical moment Willing William touched her arm.

"You are as likely to hit him!" he exclaimed. "Bide your time, and everything will come out all right. Words may cut, but they cannot kill. Besides, I begin to have an interest in this myself."

This card was the only one the sport could play, with any hope of winning the trick, and he played it "strong."

His last remark was made in a passionate whisper.

"We'll see whether I have anything to win or not, hussy!" cried the angered girl sport. "No fault of mine that my bullet went wide of the mark. It shall be your life or mine, and that shortly! Or, if what you say is true, that I have nothing to win, then I will kill Cowboy Charlie!"

CHAPTER VII.

COWBOY CHARLIE'S REQUEST.

The crowd had been standing for the most part silent, like an audience witnessing a thrilling play.

And so rapidly had the play progressed, and so well sustained had been the interest, from the beginning, that, so to say, the crowd had not been "in it," to apply the apt phrase.

Now, however, they began to take part.

They saw that the fight was off, and they surged into the street from both sides where they had been standing.

Nell Thornton made a retort in spirited manner to the last words of the girl sport, but allowed herself to be led away by Cowboy Charlie in the direction of the Grand Royal.

"The Warbler aire right," sung out Bowleg Ben. "We can't 'low no fightin' 'tween wimmin in this hyer camp!"

"A good lot you done to hender et," sneered Blue Bill.

"Ez much as you did."

"Et was Willing William what done et all, an' I p'pose three yawps an' a big one fer him!"

This seemed to strike the crowd about right, and three cheers were sent in search of the welkin in a manner that seemed to indicate that they were given in earnest.

One person who did not lend his voice was Horsehide Harker.

He was looking decidedly glum and blue—black-and-blue, to be exact, for his nose and eyes showed the usage he had received at the hands of Willing William.

The Warbler, by the way, continued to give his attention to Sport Helen.

"Where do you intend to stop?" he asked. "Can I be of service to you in any manner?"

"There is a hotel here?"

"Yes."

"Then I will go there. Where is it?"

"That building just ahead. I intend to tether there myself."

"And there is where Nell Thornton is going, I see. You cannot realize how I hate her!"

"You must not allow your hatred to lead you to do anything rash. I hope it can be settled without any violence between you. In fact, it must be, for more reasons than one."

"What do you mean?"

She looked up into his face.

They were proceeding slowly in the direction of the hotel.

"For the present I will leave my meaning for your conjecture," was the reply the sport made.

"I am not good at guessing riddles, so I shall not trouble my head greatly in trying to solve this one. You said it was Nell Thornton who killed Pony Hen?"

"Yes, it was she."

"But he ain't dead," spoke up Bowleg Ben, who was near enough to overhear what they were saying."

"Not dead?"

"No; ther bullet only raised a lump on his thick head, ther boys say, an' he will come out all right and be ready ter try et again."

"Worse luck!" exclaimed Sport Helen. "I hoped that he was disposed of."

They were now before the Grand Royal, and both slipped out of their saddles, Willing William tossing a coin to a fellow who stood near and telling him to see that the horses were properly cared for.

Sport Helen led the way into the bar-room with an easy, fearless air.

The hotel bar and office were combined, but the room being a small one, it was not a popular resort.

The Sawdust Saloon, as perhaps has been stated, was the chief place of interest in the camp, but now a curious crowd followed the two sports into the bar-room of the hotel.

"I want a room right away!" called out Sport Helen, stepping to the bar and flipping a gold coin to the clerk.

"All right; I can fix you out," assured the clerk, looking at her with admiring gaze.

"Give me my change, then, and put me to roost."

"You want to pay for one night only?"

"That's all now."

The man at the bar gave her the amount due in change, and directed her which way to go to find the room assigned to her.

She turned to Willing William.

"I'll see you again in the morning," she said. "I'll have made up my mind by that time what I'm going to do."

"All right, lady sport; you will find

me around here, no doubt, unless some long stalker comes and gathers me in during the night. I'll try to guard against that."

"You are in some danger, then?"

"No particular danger, I guess, but life is uncertain."

"You are able to take care of yourself, I fancy, and a little to spare, besides. Good-night!"

The Warbler responded, and she left the room.

Willing William turned at once to the clerk, and asked:

"Has that other girl applied for a room?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Well, when she does, put here as far from this one as possible, or they may make trouble before morning."

"Just what I thought about it myself, and that's the reason I gave the girl sport the one I did. Say, but she's a dazzer, ain't she!"

"Yes, fine looker."

Just then Cowboy Charlie entered the room.

He looked around, as if in search of some one, and seeing the sport, stepped straight to him.

"Can I have a word with you?" he asked.

"Certainly!"

"Let's step here into the hall, then."

He led the way to the door by which he had entered the room, and the sport followed him out.

"What is it?" Willing William asked.

"You understand the way things stand with me, I take it?"

"Yes, I have been able to get a pretty fair survey of the situation, Cowboy Charlie."

"And what the deuce am I to do?"

"Which of the girls is your choice?"

"Miss Thornton, of course," was the quick response.

"Where is she now?"

"In the sitting-room here."

He indicated a door on the right.

"Well, the main thing is to keep the two apart. Sport Helen has retired; why not conduct the other home?"

"Why, it is a good forty miles, and she is completely tuckered out with her long, hard ride. She came here as fast as her horse could carry her, to save my life."

"And so did the other."

"Yes, so did she."

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me whether there is a minister in the camp or not?"

"Ha! that is your plan, eh?"

"Yes; I see no other. I must protect the lady, and by wedding her I can give her the fullest protection."

"She is willing?"

"Certainly."

"Well, to your question: I am a stranger here myself and don't know, but I can find out for you."

"And I think you can help me greatly, if you are so inclined. If there is a man of that calling in the camp, and you will bring him here quietly, I shall owe you a debt of gratitude."

"All right, I'll do it; but there will be a time of reckoning in the morning, I can well imagine."

"In which you can help me again, if inclined."

"How?"

"I know, by what I have seen, that you can manage Sport Helen pretty nearly as you please."

"I am afraid I have taken a step too far in that direction already, in my desire to prevent the fight. But time enough to see to that; we'll attend to the present. I'll be back shortly and let you know the result of my inquiry."

CHAPTER VIII.

DEEPEST MYSTERY.

Cowboy Charlie gave his hand, giving the sport's a warm pressure.

They parted, the one returning to the sitting-room and the other to the bar-room whence he had been summoned.

"Who is mayor of this camp?" the Warbler asked.

"Hyer you see him," spoke up a heavy-set, whiskered man at the far end of the room.

"You are the mayor, eh? I would like to have a word with you in private, if you don't object."

"All right; come right hyer to this corner; I guess it will be private enough for all purposes, sir."

"What shall I call you?" asked Willing William, as he advanced.

"My name is Sam Fanner."

"And you know what I am called, Mr. Fanner. Do you want to take part in a matter of some interest?"

"What is it?"

"A wedding."

"Ther deuce! Yas, count me in, sartain!"

"I thought the mayor would be the right man to invite. But mum is the word, you see."

"Oh, certainly; I understand that. But who is going to get spliced? You and that dandy gal sport that came near raising Ned hyer a spell ago?"

"Oh, no; I am not in it; it is the other couple. But, what is most important, is there a minister in your camp?"

"Nary a min, partner."

"That settles the whole matter, then—"

"Wull, I reckon not, ef they are bent on couplin' up."

"Ha! you have a justice here, then?"

"And I'm ther man!"

"Ha! This is better luck than I looked for. You can perform such a ceremony legally?"

"Jest so deuced legal, partner, that there is no untyin' ther knot after I have pronounced my say-so in ther matter. You say et is ter be done on ther quiet?"

"Yes, strictly so. Let's step into the sitting-room."

"Got witnesses thar?"

"I am good for one, and we'll scare up another quietly."

They started for the door leading into the hall, but at that moment it was thrown suddenly open.

Into the room dashed Cowboy Charlie, his face pale and manner excited.

"Willing William?" he called out. "Is he here, gentlemen—ha! I see you now. Come this way, quick!"

The Warbler obeyed, with a motion to the mayor to follow, and they hastened from the room.

"What is it?" the sport demanded.

"She's gone!"

"Gone? Who?"

"The lady—Nell Thornton!"

"That is strange; you left her only a moment."

"And I thought she had merely stepped from the room while I was out, but I find that such was not the case."

"How do you know?"

"I inquired if she had been seen, and a woman servant went to look for her. In fact, I bade her go, for I felt alarmed the moment I found that she had gone out of the room."

"And she could not be found?"

"Nowhere."

"Then thar' will be no weddin', I take et," remarked the mayor, calmly.

Cowboy Charlie looked at him with pained surprise, at the little feeling he appeared to manifest in the matter.

"The mayor here is the only man in

town who could perform the service," explained Willing William, "and I brought him. But he will have to aid you in another way first."

"In ther findin' of ther bride, hey?" finished the mayor.

"Exactly."

"Yes, she must be found," cried Holton, earnestly. "She has been gone only a few minutes, and cannot be far away."

"Was she seen to leave the room?"

"Not by the woman I spoke of, any how, and she was in the room into which the other door of the sitting-room opens."

"She was there all the time?"

"Yes."

"Then the young woman certainly came out by the hall door."

"It looks so; but where in the name of wonders has she disappeared to? And why did she not await my return? I was not gone five minutes, all told."

"There is a mystery here, sure enough."

"Where is Sport Helen?"

"She has retired."

"How do you know?"

"I came here with her, and was in the bar-room when she went up to her room. She bade me good-night."

"We must know for certain whether she is in her room or not. She, if any one, is at the bottom of this. You heard her last words to Miss Thornton."

"But she could not have induced the young lady to leave the room, could she? Had she put in her appearance there would have been a sensation, as I can easily imagine."

"I must know the truth. I'll ask the man at the bar—"

"I happen to know the number of her room," interrupted Willing William. "We will go right up and knock at her door."

They hurried up the stairs, and the mayor, knowing the plan of the house, led them, on reaching the floor above, to the room they desired to find, where Willing William knocked.

There was no response.

He knocked again, and still getting no answer, tried the knob.

The door opened readily to his touch and he looked in, the light from the hall showing that the room was vacant.

"As I thought!" cried Cowboy Charlie. "They must be found!"

"What is your suspicion?" asked Willing William.

"I fear that they have gone somewhere to fight it out between themselves."

"Ha! do you think so?"

"That is what I fear."

"I did not think of that. Mayor, we must find them."

"Sartain we must. I will stir up Bower at once, and have ther hull gulch scoured."

"That must be it," mused Cowboy Charlie, aloud. "Sport Helen has watched for me to leave the room, and then has run in and challenged Nell to meet her and end the matter."

"And she would accept?"

"Some insulting word has been said that has roused her to fury."

"Well, it looks reasonable, true enough, and yet I could have sworn that the girl sport meant to retire for the night."

"She is a deep one."

"Now that I think of it, she was in great haste about going to her room. I excused that on other grounds at the time."

"Well, we must not parley here. Mayor, do what you can, will you? And you, friend," to the Warbler, "you will aid me, will you not? Your nickname leads me to rely upon you."

"Willing to do everything in my power," the sport declared.

The mayor returned to the bar-room,

where he announced what had taken place, and called upon the citizens to find the missing young women.

Willing William entered the sitting-room, followed by Cowboy Charlie, where they took a careful survey of the scene of the disappearance, as if with the hope of picking up a clew.

Nothing, however, was to be discovered that could throw any light upon the mystery.

The girls were simply missing, that was all.

Willing William and the almost distractèd lover hastened forth to aid in the general search, then.

The Warbler suggested that the stables should be visited, to ascertain whether or not the horses had been taken, and this was done in haste. The horses were in their places, just as they had been left by the man in charge. This only added to the darkness that surrounded the mystery.

CHAPTER IX.

REMARKABLE REVELATION.

At the end of an hour's search the situation remained the same.

The camp of Bower was nonplussed, and her worthy mayor had to declare that he was utterly "stumped."

It certainly was a peculiar situation—an enigma that could not readily be solved. And Charlie Holton, the man most vitally interested, was almost desperate.

"What am I going to do, Willing William?" he cried, appealing to the Warbler for advice.

"Hang me if I know," the sport made answer. "I am more than willing to aid you, but there seems to be no clew to the mystery."

"Where can those women be?"

"I give it up."

"We ar' jes' eternally stumped!" cried Mayor Fanner.

"Et looks ter be plain that they ain't in ther camp," spoke up Bowleg Ben. "What is ye'r think, Blue Bill?"

"Ther thing is past thinkin'," was the rather ambiguous answer made by the individual appealed to. "Ef et wasn't that ther hosses is in ther sheds, I would believe et had been a dream."

And so comment of every kind ran the rounds of the mystified crowd.

The search had been practically a thorough one, a hundred men or more taking part in it, and it looked as if nothing more could be done.

Cowboy Charlie and Willing William moved off together in the direction of the Grand Royal, and some of the crowd followed them, since now they were the only ones remaining of the several newcomers of the evening.

"Can't you help me with a suggestion?" appealed Cowboy Charlie. "You cannot understand how nearly crazed I am at this loss."

"We are entirely in the dark," answered Willing William, "I am the most willing fellow you ever saw, but in this case there seems to be no place to get a hold. I am somewhat like the mayor."

"But she has got to be found! Great Heavens! every minute is an hour of torture to me!"

"I can understand that. Let's go into the room where you left her."

"What for? We can't find her there."

"Nor can we find her here. We can have a confidential talk, and something may be dropped that will throw light upon the matter."

"I am afraid not. I believe it is as I thought at first, that they have gone off somewhere to fight it out, and I am afraid that Dashing Nell has got the worst of it."

"Then you think Sport Helen the better—I was going to say the better man!"

"I am afraid that she would have the advantage."

"Well, if that is the case, it is about useless to look for them, for they would take care to get away unseen and leave no trail. But I am not quite prepared to agree with you."

"You are not? Why?"

"I believe they would simply have stepped out here on the piazza and pegged away at each other, or perhaps would not have taken the trouble to leave the room. I may be mistaken, however."

"Well, let's go in and consult, as you suggested."

"Better so, where we cannot be overheard. Here, everybody is gaping at us to hear all that is said."

They had spoken in low tones, however.

Going up the steps of the piazza, they entered the front door, and thence to the sitting-room.

Willing William closed the door.

"Now," said he, "we must take hold of this business in earnest. I am ready to aid you all I can. I came here in quest of a criminal, but, not finding him, and getting no clew thus far, I am at your service."

"Why, you speak as if hunting out mysteries is your business, sir."

Willing William smiled.

"Well, I suppose it is," he admitted.

"Then you are a—a detective?"

"Yes."

"Ha! then I have hopes that you can unravel this thing for me. Any objection to telling me your name?"

"Not the slightest; but I must do so in confidence, for the present. My name is Billy Watson, but I am better known as—"

"As Detective Billy!"

"Yes."

"I have heard of you. You are no stranger to me, by reputation. Now, indeed, I have every reason to hope for a speedy solution to this enigma!"

"Well, we will tackle it, anyhow. Just tell me the story as it stood at the time of your coming here, will you? I mean this feud between you and Pony Hen, and the rivalry between the girls."

"It is soon told."

"So much the better. Go ahead!"

"We are all from the neighborhood of Running Water, over the range to the east of here. I am foreman on the range of Colonel Thornton, the father of Dashing Nell, as she has come to be called."

"I see."

"This fellow Nutter is owner of a ranch a little to the south of Thornton's ranch, and he looks down upon me from his lofty height. His pill is a bitter one to swallow—that is, it hurt his vanity as much as his heart to know that I had distanced him in the race for Miss Thornton's affections."

"That was the beginning of the trouble, then?"

"Yes. Nutter went to Colonel Thornton with his case, and the colonel is inclined to favor him, as Nutter's ranch is quite a valuable one, but when the colonel laid the matter before his daughter the truth came out, and there was a grand old walk-around at first. The colonel jumped upon me with both feet, but finally he cooled down and told Nutter to manage the affair himself."

"Sensible."

"I guess his daughter had talked plainly to him, perhaps giving him to understand that she had made up her mind, and as he had no real complaint against me, further than my being a poor man, he relented. His action toward me afterward convinced me that such was the case, anyhow. But,

then came the other difficulty, in the shape of Sport Helen, who appeared on the scene as Dashing Nell's rival, and she proceeded to make things interesting immediately."

"You ought to feel highly flattered."

"I should feel more so if things had gone on more smoothly. This girl sport is all right, I have no doubt; I never heard a breath against her good name; but, I never had a thought of loving her. I met her a few times at Running Water village, and danced with her one night at a ball there, but that was all. It seems, though, if she is telling the truth, that I must have lassoed her affections, and she appears bound to have first place if she has to force her way into it. She is bitter against Dashing Nell, as you have seen."

"How came you all here on this occasion?"

"Oh, yes; I must tell you about that. Pony Hen persisted in challenging me to fight him, and I agreed to do so, for he has made himself so hateful to me that it would give me pleasure to drop a bullet into him in a fair fight. Dashing Nell got hold of it, however, and watched so closely that there was hardly a chance for us to meet. And the less so, with Sport Helen playing the same game. So, finally, we agreed to come over here and have it out."

"And the girls got wind of it? How?"

"I don't know."

"How was the challenge sent to you?"

"By a man from Nutter's ranch."

"That has been it—he has given it away to one or both of the girls."

"You may be right; I don't pretend to know. But, here we are wasting time, and Dashing Nell in danger."

"No, we have not wasted time. In fact, I am inclined to believe we have gained time by this talk. I think I see a solution to the mystery, now. Anyhow, we shall find out."

"What do you think?"

"That Pony Hen himself is at the bottom of it."

"But he is wounded and laid on the shelf for the present. How can he be?"

"May there not have been a deeper scheme back of his challenging you to meet him here, so far away from home?"

"By Heavens! I never thought of that, Detective Billy!"

CHAPTER X. MIXING MATTERS.

It certainly looked as if the detective had struck the keynote.

Cowboy Charlie grasped his hand, and for a moment his hopes were high, but in the next moment they were depressed again.

"But, if that is the case, all the worse," he sadly reflected.

"Why so?" asked Willing William.

"Because, she may be in the power of the villain now."

"And he is just now afflicted with a soft swelling upon his dormer—so to express it. He had a close shave."

"Pity he hadn't been summoned entirely, that is all. But what can we do? You did not raise my hopes merely to dash them, did you?"

"Not by any means, my friend. I am now going into this thing for all I am worth, and I'll see what can be made of it. You are willing to aid me all you can, I suppose?"

"Willing? I would cut off my right hand if that would bring her back to me unharmed!"

"Then you will take some risks?"

"Name them."

"Dare you exchange hats and coats with me?"

"Ha! that is another idea! Billy Wat-

son, you ought to be called the prince of detectives!"

"I have done nothing, as yet."

"No matter. I see what you are coming at."

"And you will risk it?"

"Gladly."

"But maybe you are not aware that a fellow called Horsehide Harker, bully of this camp, has taken oath that he is going to explore my internal anatomy, or something to that effect."

"I care nothing for him or his threats. But, neither will you be altogether safe in my role."

"How is that?"

"Nutter may try a shot at you, thinking it's I, and pick you off."

"Or Sport Helen may run me through with a bowie, if I will not lend myself to her designs, eh?"

"Yes. The fact of the business is, I think you will be safer in your own role than in mine, and take the chances of Horsehide Harker's doing you injury, and let me run my own risks. But—"

"That is just it— But. Off with your hat and coat!"

Willing William took off his own hat and the knit jacket we have mentioned, and the exchange was quickly made.

"Now," said Watson, "you will have to exercise a good deal of care to carry out the deception, but I know you can do if you try. I hardly think any of the citizens here, save Horsehide, will molest you."

"The main thing will be to remember that my name is Willing William," responded Charlie. "I think I can get along, if the broncho don't buck too hard."

"Not a doubt of it; and now we'll go out. Don't forget to apply your own name to me if you have occasion to call me by name, and, if you hear your own name spoken, do not pay any attention."

"I'll try to play it right, never fear."

Willing William the real opened the door, and they passed out.

They crossed the hall and entered the bar-room, where the mayor, Bowleg Ben, and others, were congregated.

As he entered, Detective Billy was gratified to hear Cowboy Charlie begin to warble one of the tunes which he had heard him, the Warbler, whistling, and this was proof enough that he could play the role.

"Who knows where that wounded man was taken to?" Willing William the real inquired.

Cowboy Charlie was amazed at the clever imitation of his own voice, and it gave him a further idea of what was required of him.

"He is down at the Sawdust Saloon," answered the mayor. "Why, what aire you goin' to do, Cowboy Charlie?"

"I believe that he had a hand in this matter, somehow, and I am going to demand the truth of him. Will you come along, Willing William?"

"I'm willing," answered Cowboy Charlie the genuine.

"Come along, then."

They bent their steps in the direction of the saloon, most of those in the bar-room following them, and, arriving there, the acting Cowboy Charlie took the lead and demanded:

"Where is that fellow?"

"What fellow?"

"The one that caught that girl's bullet."

"Oh! Why, he is there in the little back room. What d'ye want o' him?"

"I want to see him, that's all."

"Ye don't mean mischief, do ye?"

"I mean business. He has got to tell what he can about the disappearance of those young women."

"Wull, I dunno' as there is any law

against that, but you don't want ter go in thar' on ther shoot, or mebby thar' will be music in the air in a way that you ain't prepared for."

"We do not mean to murder the man, sir."

The supposed Cowboy Charlie strode in the direction of the rear room, and was closely followed by the mayor.

"We don't want no kind o' play hyar that ain't perfectly square," the mayor gave notice. "What do you say to that, Willin' William?"

"That is about right," was Holton's response.

"I do no other kind of playing," answered the supposed Cowboy Charlie. "You may keep the drop on me, if you want to."

"No; we'll take ye'r word for et."

The supposed Cowboy Charlie opened the door and entered, the others following, and immediately an angry exclamation was heard, as Pony Hen was discovered sitting braced up in one corner on a couple of chairs.

"You—curse you!" he greeted.

"As you see," answered the supposed Charlie.

"Well, what d'ye want?"

"I want to know where Dashing Nell is, first of all."

"How should I know where she is? I supposed you had taken care of her."

"As I meant to do. But she has suddenly turned up missing, and I believe you know all about it."

"Well, you believe a lie, then; and even if I did, I wouldn't tell you, curse you! I'll be in shape to finish with you by daylight, cowboy beggar!"

"I do not fight with wounded men, Pony Hen."

"I will make you fight, curse you!"

"Well, if you force it, I think maybe I can make you wish you hadn't. But, do you mean to tell me that you really don't know where Dashing Nell is?"

"That is just what I mean to tell you."

"Then it is as much to your interest as mine to have her found, since you are still determined to fight for her hand. What are you going to do about it? I can't find her."

"Where is Sport Helen?"

"Missing, too."

"Ha! Maybe they have gone off somewhere to fight it out!"

"Well, maybe you are right. It is plain that you don't know anything about either of them, anyhow."

So saying, the acting Cowboy Charlie wheeled about and left the room, the supposed Willing William and the others following him, and the two mentioned by name left the saloon and retraced their steps to the hotel.

"Well, you learned nothing," remarked Holton.

"On the contrary, I learned much," declared Billy. "I am more than ever convinced that he knows all about the disappearance of Dashing Nell."

"Impossible! But, pardon me; I forgot for the instant that you are Billy Watson. What makes you think he knows, when everything he said pointed to the opposite conclusion?"

"I know it by deduction, which I will not try to explain in detail. The only thing that surprised him was to learn that Sport Helen is missing also, and he is certainly ignorant of her whereabouts. It is pretty positive that the two young women did not go off together."

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it. And, that is not all I have learned, either. I told you that I came here in quest of a criminal, and I am satisfied that this fellow Nutter is the man. I had the chance for a good square

look at him while we talked, and I think I have a surprise in store for him. We'll see. It looks like a triple case."

CHAPTER XI.

WATSON'S GREAT RUSE.

Cowboy Charlie could not comprehend. His mind having never been trained in the line of detective work, he could not grasp the matter as could Billy Watson.

"Well, I will take your word for it all, though I confess that I cannot understand it," he said. "It is more than I can see through. All that I ask is, find Miss Thornton for me and let me restore her to her father. I must do that!"

"I will do the best I can for you, my friend."

"I cannot doubt that, knowing who you are, and your best means victory, if she is alive!"

"Well, I hope so, anyhow."

"And shall we retain each other's attire?"

"Yes, that is my plan. Play well your part, and look out for that fellow Harker, for he may jump you when you least expect it."

They had by this time reached the hotel. Just when they stepped upon the piazza the front door opened, and they met a surprise.

The person who had opened the door, and who stepped out and came face to face with them was none other than one of the missing young women!

It was Sport Helen!

Cowboy Charlie the genuine took a quick step forward, but checked himself as he recollects that he was playing a part.

He kept still, and gave Willing William the chance to speak first.

Before he could do so, however, the young woman spoke, addressing herself to the one she took to be Holton.

"I want a word with you, Charlie," she said.

"Yes, and I desire to have one or two with you," responded the supposed Cowboy Charlie.

"Shall we walk up the street a way?"

"As you please."

"Your friend will excuse you?"

"Oh, certainly; willing to do anything to oblige," assured Holton, playing well his assumed part.

The hour was no longer early, but the night was light, as described, and Billy Watson took leave of Cowboy Charlie, now playing the part of Willing William, and set out with Sport Helen.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked Billy, imitating well Holton's voice and manner.

"How do you know I have been anywhere, save in my room?" was the counter-question.

"We went to your room to look for you, that is how."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I believed that you had had to do with the disappearance of Miss Thornton."

"Perhaps I had."

"I do not believe you had."

"Ha! Why do you say that?"

"For the reason that I do not believe you could have induced her to leave the room before I returned."

"Indeed! You appear to have great confidence in her. What if I tell you I know where she is, how then?"

"You will have to prove it to me."

"I will do that, on condition."

"What is the condition?"

"That you marry me instead of her!"

"You know that I am engaged to her."

"That does not matter, so long as you

are not married to her. What do you say?"

"Then you would have me find her only to break her heart?"

"Is her heart any better than mine?"

"Not a whit, my pretty Helen; but, if you are just, you will admit that she claimed me first."

"I care nothing for that. I want you and I am going to have you. If not, no one else shall. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Then what do you say?"

"Can there not be some compromise made?"

"Would you suggest marrying us both? That would not do, sir."

"Oh, no, my fair Helen; not that; but, perhaps, if you tried, you could think as much of another as you think of me."

"I am not going to try."

"For instance, what about that sport, Willing William, as he calls himself?"

Just for an instant the girl was silent.

"No; you are the one I want," she declared, emphatically.

Billy Watson was only human, and there was a good deal of temptation put in his way.

The girl sport was walking so near to him that their arms touched, and he took her hand and gently drew her arm through his own, still holding the hand.

She looked up at him with pleased surprise.

"What is your plan, Helen?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You say you know where Nell is?"

"I know how to find her, at any rate."

"Then you insist that you had nothing to do with her disappearance?"

"I had not."

"But you will not tell what you know unless I consent to marry you?"

"That is my resolve."

"And if I will promise to wed you—"

"You must not only promise, but you must marry me in fact, Charlie."

"Well, if I will do that?"

"I will aid you in getting possession of Dashing Nell, and you can restore her to her father."

"But she would be desperate."

"No more desperate than am I."

"Perhaps not."

"Well, do you agree to that plan?"

"I suppose I must," and he fondled her hand as he spoke.

Billy Watson was fancy free, and free to marry if he chose, and he could afford to play this desperate ruse.

He was certain that he had, to some slight degree, impressed the dashing girl sport, in his assumed character of Willing William, and he believed that he could make that impression deeper.

But he had a delicate matter to handle.

She returned his caress, at his last words, and hastened to say farther:

"Then there is no need to put off the ceremony a single hour, Charlie; let us return and find the mayor."

"You are playing a desperate game, fair Helen."

"I know I am."

"And you are asking me to accept your word without the slightest showing of proof."

"Do you not believe me?"

"The temptation might be great for you to deceive me."

"No, no; I am not deceiving you, Charlie. I know we can find and rescue Nell and take her home."

"What do you think of this idea?"

"Name it."

"How will it do to have that fellow, Willing William, discover and rescue Nell, and let him try to win her affection away from me?"

"It would not work, and yet—it might! To be candid with you, Charlie, I could not resist him very strongly myself, were I free to fall in love. But, now, you are asking me to play into your hands."

"It does not look very much like it."

"You want me to disclose to you where Nell is, and when once you have found her you might go back on me. I think we had better come to some compromise that will be fair to both, and yet binding upon both. What will it be?"

CHAPTER XII.

FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

Meantime Cowboy Charlie the genuine had met with an adventure.

He had stood for some moments, or minutes, on the steps of the hotel piazza, after the departure of his impersonator and Sport Helen.

Anxious to do something toward recovering his lost fiancee, and yet not knowing what to do, which way to go or what turn to make, he could not content himself with standing idle.

Finally he left the piazza and set out in the direction his friend and the girl sport had taken.

They had passed from sight, owing to a bend in the street.

The street had rapidly depopulated during the past hour, the citizens for the most part having sought their places of abode.

The camp was in a gulch, and the one street followed the trend of the gulch from east to west along its bottom. Where the camp stood the gulch was at its widest. There were several byways among the cabins and shanties, but these could hardly be called streets.

Holton went along the one street then, until he had left the camp behind, and still he continued on, lost in thought.

He was in a state of half despair.

"Where can she be?" he was saying to himself. "Shall I find her at all? But for the fact that I have Billy Watson in the game with me, I should despair. Even as it is, I almost despair."

"If it is true that Pony Hen is at the bottom of it all, where ought I to look for her? Ha! would it not be his game to get her back to his ranch as speedily as possible? Strange that I did not think of that before. I must give the thought to Watson at once."

He increased his pace.

Only a little distance further had he gone, when a man suddenly blocked his way.

It was Horsehide Harker, and he had a revolver in hand, with which he covered Cowboy Charlie, having thus a terrible advantage over him.

For the moment Holton had forgotten the part he was playing, but at sight of this man he was reminded of it most forcibly, and still more forcibly when Horsehide declared:

"Now, Mister Willing William, I reckon we'll settle that little business."

"Do you mean to give me a fair chance?" asked Holton, as calmly as he could under the circumstances.

"I ain't no out-an'-out murderer, I ain't," cried the "bullwhack." "I will give ye a chance, o' course. You jest lay ye'r guns down thar' on that boulder, and I'll put mine on this 'un."

"And what then?"

"We'll let our knives do ther' rest of ther' business."

Cowboy Charlie felt a thrill of horror pass along his spine, although he was no coward.

This man was the larger of the two, and Charlie felt that he would stand but little chance against him in such a contest.

unless fortune happened to favor him in the fight.

"And what if I refuse?" he asked.

"Thar is only one way fer you ter git out of et," was the grim rejoinder.

"And what way is that?"

"You will have ter draw an' drop me before this hyer bullet under press o' my finger kin find ye'r heart."

And that was scarcely a chance at all.

It might have been, for Willing William the real, but he was a different man.

"This is taking a fellow rather by surprise," Holton still protested. "I am placed at a disadvantage."

"Want ter worm out of et, do ye?"

"I want an equal chance."

"Somethin' of a coward at heart, after all, be ye?" was the taunt.

"I'll show you whether I am or not. I accept your proposition. But there is one favor I would ask first."

"I guess I kin grant et. You will find that I ain't altogether black. Ef I had been, I could 'a' dropped ye in ye'r tracks as ye come along. I stopped ye this way so's to give ye a chance."

"Well, I want to pencil a few words in writing."

"Ha! Then ye think ye will get ther wu'st of et, do ye?"

"There is a chance that I may, and then it will be too late for me to make my will."

"Ha! ha! Wull, rather, that is a fact! Well, I'll give ye two minutes ter say what ye want to in writin', an' then ther fun will begin."

"All right."

Cowboy Charlie took paper and pencil from his pocket immediately, and began to write, the moon giving more than sufficient light for his purpose.

When he had done, he folded the note and put it into his pocket, saying:

"Now, if I get the worst of this thing, Horsehide, just leave my body where it can be found, and this note will make known my last wishes."

"All right, boy; I'll carry out ye'r final request. Put aside ye'r guns, now, an' we will git right down to business. I have a grudge ter settle wi' you, an' I mean ter do et."

"Ready in one moment."

Cowboy Charlie drew his brace of guns and laid them on the boulder indicated, and took his knife in hand.

"Now, I will foller suit, yer see," spoke Horsehide, laying aside his own revolvers. "An' now," taking a firm grip upon a terrible-looking knife, "I am ready fer bizness."

He advanced a step as he spoke.

Cowboy Charlie faced him, not altogether fearlessly, but with a boldness born of desperation.

His face was pale, but it was hard set, and its very paleness might have been taken as simply indicative of determination. In fact, he looked a formidable antagonist.

For one moment the two men faced each other, eyes upon eyes, and then the terrible leap was made.

Each sought an advantage; neither got it.

Hand caught wrist, with unerring aim, and thus they stood locked.

"Wull, cuss ye, et was jest what I 'spected," grated Horsehide. "Now fer ther grand tug o' war!"

"And I assure you that I mean to do my little best," promised Cowboy Charlie. "I'm willing to do my share every time, you bet!"

He still played his role.

There had come to him a temptation, but he had thrust it aside.

He had been tempted to declare the truth to this fellow, that he was not the man he was taken to be.

There were good and sufficient reasons

why he would not do that, not least among which was the one reason that he would not play a coward's part. And then, it might work against Dashing Nell.

Billy Watson could do far more toward finding her than could he, and if he could disable this fellow, in the fray, he would leave the way clear for Billy to push forward his search unhindered. So, as said, he put the temptation aside, with prompt decision.

The struggle began.

Cowboy Charlie was no weakling; indeed, he had a grip of iron.

Still, his was not the giant strength of Billy Watson, and all the chances were against him.

Each tried to get the use of the hand that held his knife, at the same time resolved that the other should not do so, and they swayed this way and that in supreme effort.

For either to lose his grip meant death.

This way, that way, in supreme effort, trying to trick each other into a fall, but in vain.

But presently superior strength and weight began to tell, and Cowboy Charlie felt that he was losing, and that the end must soon come. But he was game to the very finish.

Horsehide pressed his advantage, and, after a moment, by a clever feint, he carried his antagonist off his feet and threw him.

Still Charlie clung to his wrist.

"Curse ye, let go now, Willing William!" the "bullwhack" panted. "Ye have got ter do et, willin' or not, an' then I'll explore fer ye'r liver! D'ye hear what I'm sayin'?"

In another moment, by a mighty effort, the big fellow got free his arm, and with a light laugh of exultation he lifted the knife to deal the deadly blow. But in that same moment, a most surprising thing happened, and in the most surprising manner, for "Mr. Bullwhack."

CHAPTER XIII.

SPORT HELEN'S PLAN.

Just as Horsehide lifted his arm something grabbed it.

It was something that felt like the jaws of a monster dog, for the grip closed in a painful manner.

And that was not all. With the same motion, as it were, something laid hold upon the giant at the back of his belt, and he went flying end over end.

The motive power had been furnished by Willing William the real.

"What's the meaning of this?" Watson cried, as he sent the fellow flying as mentioned. "Had the best of you, had he, Willing William? Well, I guess Cowboy Charlie will chip in on your side!"

"And for which I am accordingly grateful," declared Cowboy Charlie the genuine, as he leaped to his feet. "I have to admit that Horsehide here is stronger than I am, and I guess it would have been all up with me if you had not happened along. I hope I can repay the debt."

"Yer kin bet ye'r life et would 'a' been all up with ye!" roared the "bullwhack," getting upon his feet with a scramble. "But we'll try et again, you see ef we don't! I have got a score ter settle wi' you!"

"All right; only give me a fair show, that is all I ask," responded Holton, as coolly as if he had not just escaped death by a hair's breadth.

"Yes, I'll do that," agreed the terror of the town. "I know ye'r strength now, my chicken."

"I'll try to work up a little more muscle."

"See that yer do; ye wull need et."

"Well, here, don't go off without your

guns. You will need them, and they are of no use to me. You offered me a fair fight, and I hold no grudge on that score. Take what belongs to you."

With a sullen growl the fellow came back and got his guns, when he walked off with a grunt that might have been taken for a good-by.

Then, for the first time, Cowboy Charlie the real noticed Sport Helen.

"You had a close call, Mr. Warbler," she observed.

"Yes, decidedly close," was the response. "I am always willing to accept all that comes my way when I can't get out of it, however."

At that Billy Watson had to laugh.

"Well, Mr. Warbler, to apply the same name to you," he said, "join us, and we will all go back to the hotel together. Lucky that we happened along."

"Decidedly lucky for me, Mr. Holton," responded Cowboy Charlie the genuine. "I hope it will happen as fortunately the next time."

"And I hope that you will not fall in with that fellow again, sir."

Charlie had gathered up his hat and his guns while speaking, and when he had brushed some of the dirt from his clothes they set forward.

"Sport Helen and I have come to an agreement," said Watson, then.

"And what is the agreement, Cowboy Charlie?" asked the real Cowboy Charlie of his impersonator.

"It is one in which I have had to make something of a sacrifice, but I thought it better to do so, for the sake of my employer's daughter."

"Ha! is that so?"

"You call it a sacrifice, then," demanded Sport Helen.

"Well, that was the first word I got hold of. I hope it will turn out otherwise."

"You could have said that you have been induced to change your mind."

"Well, have it that way. I have been induced to change my mind, Willing William."

"Well, what is the arrangement?" asked the pretending Willing William.

"I am to marry Sport Helen."

"The deuce!"

"That is the arrangement."

"And when will this happy event take place?"

"As soon as we can find the mayor, when we reach the hotel."

Cowboy Charlie began to whistle in a way the Warbler himself could not have surpassed.

"Well, this is a surprise, sure enough!" he remarked. "You have interested me. May I hear the whole story?"

"I guess so."

Watson looked at Sport Helen.

"Why, yes, tell him, to be sure," said she.

Sport Helen had her hand hooked in the arm of the man she believed to be Cowboy Charlie, but who, as we know, was Billy Watson—Detective Billy.

She saw in the other man, as she supposed, Willing William, the sport surnamed the Whistler from Whistleville, really her own Cowboy Charlie, or Charles Holton, the man she loved!

Watson was playing a daring role, truly.

"Well, it is like this," Billy explained. "Miss Atson here says she knows where Miss Thornton is, and, on condition that I marry her, she will lead me to the rescue. I am in a manner forced."

"There seems to be little choice left for you, that is true," observed Holton.

"And I feel it a duty I owe to my employer to rescue his child, even though by so doing I lose her myself."

"I suppose you are free to marry whom you will?"

There was a meaning in this deeper than Sport Helen caught at that time.

"I am free to enter into honorable marriage with whoever I please, sir," was the straightforward response.

"But your preference was the other lady?"

"Well, she had first claim."

"It is a great affair, to say the least about it."

"But it will come out all right," averred Sport Helen, cheerfully. "I will do my part to make it come out right."

"Then you hold no real personal malice toward Miss Thornton?" queried the supposed Willing William.

"Bless you, no; but, as my rival, I was against her from the word go!"

"Well, I wish you both joy, certainly."

"Have no doubt otherwise," asserted Sport Helen, promptly. "That is what we are going in for, eh, Charlie?"

"Yes, if my other love does not kick up a fuss and do us some damage," was the reply. "By the way, can't you get her to fall in love with you, Willing William?"

"I should like to, candidly," answered Holton.

"Well, try it. I'll tell you what can be done."

"And what is that?"

"We can arrange it so that you can be the one to rescue her, and perhaps you will be able to impress her favorably."

"Ha! here is a thought!" suddenly exclaimed Sport Helen.

"What is it?"

"I should delight in playing her a trick."

"And what would it be?"

"You two gentlemen look somewhat alike."

"Yes, that is true."

"How would it do for Mr. Warbler here to pretend that he is Cowboy Charlie, and marry her?"

"Could you expect me to be a party to any such deception as that?" asked the pretended Cowboy Charlie.

"It would be a good thing for her if you would, since you cannot have her yourself."

"And why so?"

"She will have to marry that fellow Nutter."

"But she will not do that."

"Her father will try to force her to do it anyhow. I am no angel, but I would not marry him if he were gold plated and set with diamonds!"

"What do you say?" asked Watson, turning to Holton.

"If the young woman is willing, I have no objections," was the answer. "I am willing to do almost anything that comes in my way, if it isn't downright dishonest. I rather fancy the lady."

"Is not your fancy a little erratic?" asked Sport Helen, with a meaning emphasis.

"You may have reason to think so," was the response.

Of course Holton was not in position to appreciate her meaning in its fullness.

Not so, Billy Watson, however. He knew that the young woman referred to the slight flirtation he had undertaken with her, and now a new thought came into his mind, which he set about making known to the others immediately.

It was certainly something original, in its way.

CHAPTER XIV.

A GAME FOR A BRIDE.

"I have an idea," Watson said.

"What is it?" asked Sport Helen.

"One that has just struck me. I will make a proposition."

"Let us hear it," invited Holton. "Maybe it is something we will fall in with at once."

"I am not so sure that we will," declared Sport Helen. "I am sure that I will not, if it interferes with my scheme."

"Well, it does, and it does not. I will tell you what it is, and then you can judge of that for yourself."

"Very well."

"As the matter stands, you are forcing me to do your will."

"Well, yes."

"You ought to know that a man does not like to do anything against his inclination."

"I have heard so."

"Well, it is so. I do not like to be forced into this thing against my former design and intention. I had rather come down to it a little more gracefully."

"What is your idea?"

"It is this: Suppose Mr. Warbler and I play a game at cards for your hand, the winner to wed you and the loser to try to wed Miss Thornton. What do you say to that?"

"I don't cotton to that worth a cent."

"And why not?"

"You ask me to hand over the right bower I am holding in my hand, and that will give you a possible chance to dump me and marry Nell."

"No; I promise you that it shall be a fair deal."

"What do you think about it, Mr. Warbler?" appealing to Holton, the supposed Willing William.

"I am willing to do anything to keep peace in the family," was the reply. "I like to be obliging when I can, especially to please the ladies."

Watson could hardly resist the temptation to pat the fellow on the back for the clever way in which he was playing his assumed part. It was almost as well done as Billy could have done it himself.

"But if I give up what I know, I give up my hold entirely," reminded the girl sport.

"You have our promise of fair play."

"Can't help that, there will be another voice in the matter, as soon as Nell is found, and she and I are likely to fight."

"There is another point," said Billy. "It will be a duel in itself, as it were, and one in which neither can get hurt. I will play for you, Sport Helen, and Warbler can play for Nell."

The girl sport thought hard for some moments."

"No; it won't quite do," she decided. "That is asking me to show down my hand before the game is called. But, I'll tell you what I will do, if you are willing, Charlie."

She addressed Billy, of course.

"And what is that?"

"You and Mr. Warbler may play a game for Nell's hand, here in my presence, and I will abide by the result."

"Why not a game for your hand?" asked Holton.

"Because I have a suspicion that Charlie would play a weak game, and you a strong one, and it would be all one-sided."

"Well, are you willing to try such a game?" asked Billy the real.

"Willing to do anything," answered the supposed William. "Neither of us can lose very largely."

"I thank you for such a good opinion, anyhow, sir," spoke Sport Helen. "Let us draw aside from the trail to that flat boulder yonder, and you can play the game by moonlight."

"Agreed!"

So they drew aside from the road and seated themselves around the boulder.

The two men had their hats pulled down slightly over their faces, in order that the young woman might not study their features too closely.

"What game shall it be?" asked Billy.

"What do you say to the best two in three at euchre?"

"That suits me as well as anything. But have you any cards?"

"I have," spoke up Helen.

She produced a pack from her pocket as she spoke, and handed it across to the supposed William.

"It is a plain euchre deck, with no joker in it," she added in explanation. "Now, let her go, and I'll see which of you is to be my husband."

One thing was patent enough to Watson. He saw that the girl's heart had undergone something of a change since her meeting with him, or she would never have agreed to this chance.

In his heart of hearts he decided to win her, and not only that, but make her his bride!

However, such had been his intention before, but then it had been with the one purpose of aiding Cowboy Charlie out of his difficulty. Now it was to please himself as well.

Holton shuffled and dealt the cards at Billy's request.

Then the games began.

Sport Helen watched the cards with careful eye, to detect the slightest sign of cheating, but she saw nothing of the sort.

The first game was easily won by Billy in a short time, and the second was begun, which proved to be a closer contest. It was hard fought, for, under the peculiar circumstances, Holton had to do his level best.

Billy had a delicate part to play here.

In order to win Sport Helen, he had to lose the games, but in order to do that without exciting suspicion, he had to make a pretense of playing hard.

Finally Holton won.

Then came the final act, and the interest was at white heat, so to say.

There was something so novel about it all that each of the trio was impressed with the situation. However, whichever won, the game still remained in the hands of the two men.

It would be only a matter of their assuming, secretly, their rightful personalities.

The moment Billy glanced at his last hand he saw that the game was all right. It stood then so that the gaining of a point won the game for Holton!

Billy fought in earnest, with the poor cards he had, but knew that he could not win. It was only to deceive the close watcher, who was evidently no novice with the wicked pasteboards.

The substitute Willing William won!

"Well, that leaves it as it was," decided Watson, or Willing William the real. "Fair Helen, let us seal it with a kiss."

"Here you are!" was the ready agreement, as the girl put up her lips.

Billy kissed her heartily, and assisted her to rise.

"Now," said he, "since this thing has been settled finally, why not rescue Dashing Nell before we go any farther with the matter?" he proposed. "While I am bound not to marry her, still I am bound to rescue her and restore her to her father."

"You mean rescue her for me," reminded the pretender.

"Yes, pardon me; I forgot."

"No, I am still going to have it my way," persisted Sport Helen. "Dashing Nell will keep all right, and we will go and get married at once."

"Well, if you are bound to have it so."

"And I am. I am going to make sure of you now. You have had a fair chance to win Nell, and cannot feel that you have been forced."

"No, I do not feel that I have been forced now."

"Then we will carry out my plan. You see, if we rescue Nell first, she may object to what has been done, and will try to undo it. If you are already my husband, her kicking will be useless."

"Well, there is something in that," agreed Billy. "Take my arm, bonnie bride, and we will settle the little business first of all. Mr. Warbler, you will come along as witness, I suppose?"

"Willing to do anything, sir, for sake of peace," was the prompt reply.

And so they made their way back to the camp center.

They entered the hotel, where Sport Helen went into the bar-room with them, and there they found the mayor talking with a group of friends.

"We want your services for a few minutes, sir," explained Watson. "Will you please step with us into the sitting-room?"

"Not necessary to do that," spoke up Sport Helen. "Let the ceremony be performed right here, and the boys can have the pleasure of witnessing it. I am not a kid-glove miss, by any means; this will do for me."

"All right; so let it be!" agreed Billy.

CHAPTER XV.

SPORT HELEN'S STORY.

The mayor rubbed his eyes as if he did not exactly understand the situation.

"I thought you wanted me to marry you to that other gal, a spell ago," he observed. "Is this hyar all reg'lar?"

"There has been an all-around change of mind," explained the pretending Cowboy Charlie. "This lady has won me over to her side, and I have lost my first choice at a game of cards."

"Wull, I be blamed! Of all ther nights this hyer camp of Bower ever experienced, this hyer jest tops ther pack! Do you mean et, gal?"

"Certainly I mean it, sir."

"And you are of ripe age and free ter marry?"

"Yes to both questions, sir. Hardly needful to have asked the first."

"Don't know 'bout that. You ar' a good looker, an' don't look ter be a long ways past legal age."

"No matter; I am over the border safe enough, and am as free as a bird to choose my mate. Drive right ahead, Mr. Mayor; you will make no mistake."

"You hear what she says, boys?"

He called the crowd to witness.

"You bet!"

"And you, sir, are you free to marry this young woman honorably?"

"I am as free as she can be herself, sir," was the response. "There is nothing in the way on my side in the bargain."

Billy eyed the girl sport as he said this, but nothing in her manner indicated that she had spoken other than the real truth.

"Wull, this hyer bein' ther situation, thar' is nothin' in ther way of my doin' what ye want me ter do—hitch ye up fer life," the mayor remarked. "Ye will please j'ine hands."

This was done.

"And, now, what's ye'r names?" the mayor asked.

"Mine is Helen Atson," declared Sport Helen, speaking with firm voice and cool manner.

"And my name is William Watson!"

Sport Helen looked at him in amaze.

"What?" she demanded.

He repeated the name.

"But, I supposed your name was Charlie Holton? What does it mean?"

"It means, simply, that I have been wearing that name for a time, for a good

reason. I have now given my lawful name. I trust you have done the same."

"I have given the only name I know, sir."

"I am satisfied."

"Wull, is et all right?" asked the mayor.

"Yes, sir, it is all right," answered the girl sport. "Let 'er go."

"Wull, then, William Watson, do you take this hyer woman ter be your lawful wedded pard, fer better or wuss, to stick to through life, and love an' cherish and protect?"

"I do," said Billy.

"An' you, Helen Atson, do you take this hyer man ter be your lawful wedded life pard, fer better or wuss, to stick to through life, ter love an' obey till death, and ter remain true to him from beginnin' to end?"

"You bet!"

"Sech bein' the case, I, Samuel Fanner, a justice of the County of P—, do hereby render my verdict, in the presence of these hyer witnesses, that you are now man an' wife, accordin' to law, and thar' is nothin' that I know of that kin make ye any more so. Amen!"

It was certainly a unique wedding.

The crowd immediately broke into a cheer, and called upon the new-made husband to treat, which Billy promptly did.

He tossed a coin to the man at the bar, telling him to serve all who came in for it, and giving his arm to his wife, motioned the mayor and the supposed William to follow him.

He led the way from the room and across the hall into the sitting-room.

"Now, mayor," he said, "a little matter before we proceed further. Will you please bear witness to my identity?"

"I guess thar' will be no trouble about that."

"But there may be. There will be an angry woman in the field, perhaps, when we recover Miss Thornton."

"Wull, you will be ther same man, won't ye?"

"Undoubtedly. And, in order to prove that I am the same man, just cast your eye at these scars on my left arm."

Billy drew up his sleeve and disclosed some ugly-looking seams, the result of a former hard-fought battle in his dangerous life business.

"I see 'em," said the mayor.

"You see them, Helen?"

"Certainly."

"All right. And, by the way, you may now call me Billy. May as well begin right."

"Just as you say. I have promised to obey, you know."

"You will be a model wife, if you keep that obligation ever in mind, fair pard. I will not ask unreasonable things of you. And now to business."

"What's ther business?" asked the mayor.

"The finding of Miss Thornton."

"Ha! sure 'nuff."

"Helen, you must now do your part and tell us what you know. No more time must be lost, now that you have carried your own point."

"You will find that I will keep my word."

"Well, your story, then."

"You want to hear it all, everything in full?"

"Yes, if it can be told without great delay in getting to 'e rescue."

"I can tell it all about as soon as half."

"Go ahead, then."

"Well, I had a liking for you, and meant to have you if I could get you, and when I found I had a rival, I was all the more determined."

"You must cut shorter than that, Helen."

"You will have to take it as you get it. That is my style, and I don't think I can change it much."

"Well, forge ahead!"

"Then, you see, Thornton saw how the wind was blowing, and he came to me and urged me on, and promised me a thousand dollars if I would marry you and break up the other attachment."

"You are a schemer."

"And we will stand a thousand dollars to the good, don't you see?"

"Never mind that."

"You see, Thornton was determined that Nell should marry Nutter, as he is a rich fellow and owns a fine ranch, and it all played into my hands nicely. But I am glad there is still a way of escape for her, for he is not worthy of her, by any means. I certainly would not marry him."

"So you have said."

"Well, he laid a scheme. He challenged you to meet him here to fight him, and at the same time posted his messenger to tell Nell what was going to take place; for he knew she would come here full tilt to take a hand in the game, or to warn you of danger. And so she did, and Nutter had some of his men here to capture her and make her prisoner—"

"Curse him!" grated the genuine Cowboy Charlie.

Sport Helen looked at him quickly, for, unthinkingly, he had spoken in his natural voice.

"What is it to you?" she demanded.

"Isn't it everything to me, if there is a chance of my winning her?" he demanded. "I am willing to take up the matter where Cowboy Charlie has laid it down."

He caught up the cue again so cleverly that he brushed away the spark of suspicion that had been just ready to kindle, and Watson drew a breath of relief, for he did not want the revelation to come just yet.

"But where is she now?" Billy eagerly asked, taking care to play well his assumed role.

"She is in the power of Nutter's men. I was in the secret, you see, and I had an eye open for their scheme. And I must tell you how that was. Thornton found out what was up immediately after his daughter had set out, and so he rode straight to Running Water and told me and sent me on to take a hand in the game. His lame leg was by that time so painful that he could not ride any further himself. Instead of going to my room, when I left the bar-room, I stationed myself where I could watch Dashing Nell without discovery, and I saw all that took place. I know where she is, and I am ready to lead you to the rescue. I can afford to be generous now!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DASHING NELL DISCOVERED.

Needless to say, her hearers were interested.

And especially so was the genuine Cowboy Charlie, who could hardly control his impatience.

But it was necessary for him to do so, for nothing would be safe until this girl sport had finished and told all she knew. She still held the "trump."

"Well, you certainly played well your hand, pard Helen," said Watson. "You had the bulge on me in a way that I could not get out of, sure enough. Now, for the rescue, if you are ready."

"And I told you I was ready."

"Then let us have the final points."

"All right, here they are: The way Nell came to be missing from the room was this: Pony Hen's men had bribed the woman servant to aid them, and as

soon as you left the room, Charlie—I mean Billy—she entered and motioned Nell to follow her. She led her to the kitchen, where a couple of Pony's tools seized her."

"Curse him!" grated Holton, under his breath.

"Then, when you came in and asked the woman if she had seen her," the girl continued, "she lied to you, and there was the mystery. I do not wonder that you were all baffled. But they did not dump me, you bet, for I was on their trail as heavy as a dozen Injuns, and I ran them down and got at their secret in the neatest kind of way!"

"Gal, you ar' a trump!" exclaimed the mayor.

"And she played her joker, too," said Watson.

"That she sartain did, boy."

"But where is my bride-to-be?" demanded Holton. "I have an interest in this matter, now, you see. I'm ready and willing to fly to her rescue."

"Why, she is in the shanty of one Buckskin Dan—"

"Ther p'izen whelp!" cried the mayor. "He has been makin' as big a fuss as anybody about findin' her!"

"I have had my eye on him," declared Sport Helen. "He is in with Pony's two men, and they have Dashing Nell safe in their power. It will take a cool hand to work the rescue."

"I guess there are hands enough here to do it," said Billy.

"Enough right here!" cried the supposed Willing William, holding out his own two.

"I don't doubt it," assented Billy; "but we must go about it in a quiet manner. I think the mayor can well play the first card."

"Bet yer life I'll do et!" cried Fanner.

"Well, you go to the shanty and tell the fellows that Pony Hen wants to see them at once at the Sawdust Saloon, and for them to leave Buckskin Dan in charge till their return."

"But s'pose Dan ain't thar'?"

"Then tell one to go."

"Kerreck."

"Then," added Billy, "you can wade in and do the heroic, Willing William, and win yourself a bride."

"And I am more than willing to do it," Holton cried, still playing the role. "Don't let's waste another minute, for now that I am interested I am growing impatient to wind up the matter."

"Come along!" urged the mayor.

Sport Helen had now revealed her hand fully, and the game was theirs.

But she had taken good care to score her own tricks first, though there was a surprise in store for her of which she little dreamed.

They left the hotel, turning down by the side of it where a narrow passage separated it from another building, intending to take advantage of approaching the shanty by a rear way.

As they reached the rear of the hotel Billy Watson caught sight of a woman running in the same direction.

Without a word he sprang after her with the speed of a deer.

She had turned a corner, but he caught sight of her again, and in another moment his hand fell upon her shoulder.

She gave voice to a scream, for she had not been aware that she was followed in that manner, and she tried to jerk away, but Billy held her fast, and he recognized her.

It was the woman servant of the hotel.

"Been listening, have you?" Billy demanded, severely. "And thought you would give the alarm, eh? Well, your little game has been nipped in the bud, you see!"

The woman begged to go free, but Billy held fast to her and led her back to the others.

"Here is one prisoner for you, already, mayor," he said.

"And right hyer is ther calaboose!" returned the mayor. "We'll dispose of her in jest one mighty minnit!"

A few steps brought them to Bower's jail, and the mayor opened the door and pushed the woman inside, locking the door upon her in spite of her cries and protests.

The woman's cries had brought some of the citizens out of their domiciles, all of whom were eager to learn what was up, and they were told in brief that the object of it all was the rescue of Dashing Nell.

When they came in sight of Buckskin Dan's shanty, the others stepped out of sight, while the mayor advanced to the door and knocked.

There was a stir within, and a voice demanded:

"Wull, who is thar'?"

It was Dan himself.

"You got two lodgers here?" asked the mayor.

"What ef I have?" was the defiant rejoinder.

"Ef ye have, and they are friends of Pony Hen, he wants ter see 'em quick at ther Sawdust Saloon, that's all."

This made more of a stir within, decidedly.

"What does he want?" demanded another voice, in a hurry.

"How ther mischief do I know what he wants?" retorted the mayor. "I have informed ye; you kin do as ye please about goin'."

And with that he turned away.

He rejoined the others where they were in waiting.

"Now, boys," he said, "when them 'ar galoots comes along hyer we'll hold 'em up an' run 'em into ther calaboose."

Billy Watson approved of this, and further advised that the whole affair should be kept as quiet as possible, in order that Pony Hen might not take alarm before the morrow.

Presently the two men from Dan's house came hurrying along, and they were held up and made prisoners so quickly that they did not know what had happened.

They were lodged in the jail, and a couple of men were left on guard, one inside and the other without.

Meantime, Cowboy Charlie the genuine had gone on to the shanty.

He knocked, as the mayor had done.

"Wull, what'n blazes is et this time?" Buckskin Dan roughly demanded.

"Ther boss wants you ter fetch ther gal quietly out to ther corner," was the whispered answer. "Ther way is all clear."

"An' who ar' you?"

"I'm another of his men. You don't know me."

"And fer that reason I don't trust ye. Git ter blazes out of thar', quick!"

For answer to that, Cowboy Charlie stepped back a pace and hurled himself against the door with all his strength.

By the looks of the door he had judged that he could force it.

And he was not mistaken. In it went, with a crash, and he confronted the astonished Buckskin Dan with a gun in his grasp.

"Hands up!" he ordered, "or I'll make it heads down!"

The fellow put up his hands, as invited, without parley, for he saw "shoot" in Charlie's eyes.

Moreover, he took him to be Willing William, and he had seen something of his prowess in his dealings with Horsehide Harker, in the Sawdust.

He wanted none of it!

Another man followed Charlie in, who made Dan a prisoner without loss of time.

Holton then looked around to find Dashing Nell, but she was not in that room. He saw a side door, however, and opening that, found his fiancee in a small adjoining room, a prisoner.

She was bound and gagged, and was lying on a rude bed.

Charlie released her at once, and quickly gave some hurried explanations of the situation of affairs.

He then led her forth, and by that time Billy Watson and his bride had come up, and there they all met, in the dim light of the little cabin, and there was a dramatic situation strong enough for any stage.

With a cry Dashing Nell sprang forward and threw herself upon Billy Watson's breast, but she was immediately confronted by Sport Helen.

Let another chapter depict what followed.

CHAPTER XVII.

"BELLOWING BULLWHACK."

"Hands off, if you please!" Sport Helen cried.

And Billy, at the same time, gently removed Dashing Nell's arms from around his neck.

"What do you mean?" Nell asked, as if dazed.

And she looked first at one and then at the other, as if failing to understand.

Of course, as the reader has been apprised, Cowboy Charlie had given her the cue as to her part.

"It means that this man is my husband!" exclaimed Sport Helen, triumphantly.

"Is it true, Charlie?"

"Yes, it is true," answered Billy. "I had to come to her terms in order to rescue you from the hands of these wretches, Nell."

She drew back from him, and the supposed Willing William lent her the support of his hand, as if to prevent a fall should she faint, willing to do his little part, as usual.

"You—you cannot mean it?" she gasped.

"It's true, you bet!" cried Sport Helen.

"Why did you not let me remain and take the chances?" Nell complained.

"I could not do it, Nell, knowing into what vile hands you had fallen," was the rejoinder. "Helen held the key to the situation, and I had to yield in order to save you. Will you forgive me, Nell?"

The girl roused up, as if with a spirit of resentment, and answered:

"Oh, yes, I freely forgive you, and am greatly obliged, besides. I wish you both much joy. I see there is no hope for me now but to wed the man of my father's choosing—but, stay; there is yet escape in death, and I will take advantage of that. I have sworn never to wed him!"

"I'll tell you of a better way than that," suggested Sport Helen.

"You are generous, truly. What is it?"

"Marry your rescuer!"

Nell turned and looked Holton in the face.

"I am ready and willing," said he, quickly. "Willing William by name, I am just as willing by nature."

In spite of himself, Billy Watson had to laugh.

"It will be an escape, anyhow," said Dashing Nell, as if communing with herself in the matter. "I certainly cannot make a worse mistake than I would by wedding that fellow Nutter."

"It is the neatest kind of a way out of it," urged Sport Helen.

Nell held out her hand to her lover.

"Are you indeed willing?" she asked.

"That's what I have said," was the response. "Never more willing to do anything in my life, miss."

"Then I will marry you."

"That settles it. Mr. Mayor, here is another job for you."

"Ahem!" said the mayor, clearing his throat for action. "Do you mean that it is a go, right here and now?"

"I am willing, if the lady is," declared Holton.

"Let it be done!" commanded Nell.

So the mayor repeated the ceremony he had performed at the hotel, and in about the same words, and "William Warbler" and Nellie Thornton were made man and wife, according to law and Samuel Fanner.

"Allow me to congratulate you, sir," and Billy Watson offered his hand to Holton.

"Thank you!" was the response.

And they shook hands even more heartily than the witnesses around them had any idea about.

"I hope you will live just as long, Nell, and die just as hard, as though you had won the man of your choice," offered Sport Helen.

"Thanks!" responded Dashing Nell, "and the same good wishes to you, with all my heart. When we can't have what we want we have to take what we can get, in this world."

"That is about the size of it, I guess. By the way, I am willing to shake hands, if you are."

"Well, since what is done can't be undone, I am willing."

Their hands met.

"An' blame me ef I don't think I will go an' take a drink on et!" exclaimed the mayor. "What d'ye say to et, boyees?"

"If you do that," spoke up Holton, "it must be at my expense. Here, take this and treat everybody you find around," handing the mayor a bill as he spoke. "Drink to our long lives and happiness."

"You bet we wull!"

"But take care of Buckskin Dan, first," warned Billy.

"Cert."

The newly-married couples made their way to the hotel, and sought their rooms for the night, and when the mayor had made sure of his prisoners, at the calaboose, he led the crowd to the Sawdust.

There they drank heartily to the brides and grooms, individually and collectively, to the limit of their fund, and further.

And Pony Hen, who had been helped to bed, was oblivious to it all.

On the following morning Billy Watson and Charlie Holton were up early.

This was in accord with an understanding they had had on the previous night, and they met on the stairs.

They shook hands, and, descending, entered the little sitting-room, where they proceeded to exchange their borrowed garments and assume their proper identity.

"Well, the worst is now to come," observed Cowboy Charlie.

"Yes, I have got to face the music, now," said Willing William. "But I am willing to do that."

"You have not told your bride?"

"Not a word. But they won't be up for an hour yet."

"I suppose not. We may as well take a little stroll to kill time. But what the mischief is that?"

There had come to their ears a bellow from the street.

"It sounds to me like the bazoo of Horsehide Harker," said Billy Watson, in his cool manner.

"That's what it is, sure enough! He has come to finish you off. After his tussle with me last night, he feels sure of his ability to do you up."

Watson smiled in his grim fashion.

"Hyar I be!" the terrible fellow was bellowing aloud. "Tumble out hyer, all you galoots of Bower, and see ther sarcus what's jest come ter town! Horsehide Harker has put on his spurs, an' he is goin' ter settle matters wi' that Warblin' William what is so willin' ter do anything that comes ter hand! Hustle out hyer, I tell ye, an' see ther fine manner in which I am goin' ter polish him off!"

"Are you not afraid?" asked Cowboy Charlie of Billy.

"Don't you see me tremble?" asked Billy, smiling.

"Will you go out and oblige him?"

"You bet! I must disabuse his mind of the error under which he is laboring. I can't get out of a challenge so loud-mouthed as that."

"Come right out hyer, you Willin' Will-yum!" the "bullwhack" was bellowing. "I am all cocked an' primed fer ye now, you kin bet yer life, an' we will settle our leetle score in a duel wi' fists! Come right out hyer, an' let me chaw ye fer my appetite! I will fix ye up ter have yer pictur' tooken! Come right out, now, an' face ther big mawlies of ye'r humble servant!"

Billy and Charlie left the sitting-room, and Billy opened the front door.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you this morning? You look as if you had been used for a football lately!"

The fellow's loud cries had brought men running from every direction; there was a goodly crowd on hand, and everybody laughed heartily. He looked as if something had happened.

His nose was as big as two, his eyes were all swollen up, there was more black upon his face than white, and he looked like a caricature of the Old Boy himself.

"I will play a football game wi' you, right hyer an' now!" he roared. "You jest shed yer weepins and step out hyer, and we'll try et man to man, in a fair an' square stand-up-and-knock-out jamboree!"

"Are you pining to sample me again?" asked Billy.

"That's what I am!"

"Then I suppose I shall have to oblige you."

"I ruther reckon ye wull! Oh! but won't I jest polish you this time, my little laddie!"

"Yes, I suppose you will. You came near to doing it last night, and that is what lends you courage this morning. But I give you fair warning that I am right in trim for a fight, and I'll do you up badly."

"Ye wull, hey? Jest come down hyer and begin, will ye?"

"I'm willing to oblige you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAPPY ENDING.

Horsehide did not know what he had bargained for.

But he was going to find out, before he was much older, and in a way to convince him.

Willing William delivered his weapons to Cowboy Charlie, and called upon the mayor to see to it that the "bullwhack" had no weapon about his person.

The mayor himself made the search, taking every weapon Mr. Horsehide had, and Watson stepped quietly out into the street to face him, glancing up at the hotel windows as he did so.

Feminine faces were at two of the win-

dows, and he recognized his bride and Dashing Nell.

"Are ye ready?" cried the "bullwhack."

"Ready and willing!" was the cheerful answer.

"And this hyer is to be a fight to the finish—a reg'lar clean out."

"I am willing to have it so. Bless you, I am the most obliging fellow in the world!"

"I begin to believe you aire, by mighty! And this hyer is to settle ther score 'tween us. If you lick me, I'll shake hands wi' ye and say quits."

"All right."

"And you'll do ther same?"

"Yes."

"Nuff said, then. You aire a man o' grit, blame me ef ye ain't, an' I can't hold a grudge, but I must prove my own claim ter boss of ther walk in this hyer town!"

"And you are no coward, you have proven that, sir," complimented Watson, and he meant it. "Your meeting me last night in the manner you did proved that. I have that much respect for you."

"Good enough, pard. An' now wade in an' do ye'r leetle best, fer I warn ye that I am goin' ter punish ye hard."

"All right, let 'er go, Gallagher!"

The big fellow pranced forward and brandished his arms for the fray.

Billy let him come near enough, and then tapped him lightly on his already sore nose, as a beginner.

Horsehide's rage was up in an instant, as tears from the sudden pain sprang to his eyes, and he "sashayed" forward as if he would eat his antagonist up.

He pounded the air, since he could find nothing else to hit, and Billy played with him like a kitten might play with a mouse, to the immense delight of the audience, who hurled all manner of taunts at the giant.

"Pulverize him, Horsehide!" yelled one.

"Annihilate him!" another.

And so forth.

Billy waited until the big fellow began to pant a little; then he went for him.

He caught him under the ear with his left, gently lifting him; then he caught hold of him and tossed him up in the air, causing him to turn a complete summerset.

And, as he came down, he caught him again, flopping him over and around, cuffing him right and left without mercy, until the big fellow began to yelp like a whipped cur, and begged piteously for mercy. Whereupon Billy put a string in his mouth and played horse with him. He passed the string under his arms, and, taking hold of the ends, made the big, whiskered fellow run around, to the side-splitting delight of the amused assembly.

"That is the way I break in horses of this kind," Billy said. "I guess he will go steady after this, single or double."

"Let up! let up!" Horsehide begged. "I give in, clean done up entirely!"

"Then you will shake hands?"

"Yes."

Billy desisted, and the "bullwhack" was as good as his word.

"I own you 'boss,'" the big fellow said, frankly: "I am satisfied, clear down in my boots. But thar' is one thing that knocks me."

"And what is that, my giant friend?" asked Billy.

"How et was that you didn't do this last night, when et was in grim earnest."

"Well, you will understand that later on," assured Billy. "Go and straighten yourself out, now, and then come and crook your elbow at my expense. I am satisfied if you are."

"Satisfied! Bless ye, my corpus is chock-full o' satisfaction!"

And with that the fellow went off. Meantime, Dashing Nell had come down, and was standing on the piazza, with her arm hooked in that of her husband.

Just as Watson reached the piazza steps, when he turned toward the hotel, the door opened and his own bride came out, looking as fresh and dazzling as a morning pink.

The first thing she saw was Dashing Nell, and the fond manner in which she was standing by Cowboy Charlie.

Sport Helen's face paled, and she strode forward quickly and faced them.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"Hands off, here, if you please," spoke up Dashing Nell, making use of Sport Helen's words of the night before.

"What are you talking about?" the girl sport cried. "This is my husband."

"I guess not," retorted Nell. "He is mine!"

"Yours!"

"Permit me to offer myself as a willing compromise here," now spoke up Billy Watson, lifting his hat and bowing. "You happen to be my wife, Sport Helen."

"Your wife, sir?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

Her face was a rosebud of blushes.

"Not at all," asserted Billy. "Here, look at the arm you saw last night at the time of our marriage."

He pulled up his sleeve, showing again the same scars.

The woman changed color, and for a moment could not speak. Then a pleased light shone in her eyes, and she seized Billy's hand.

"I am satisfied, more than satisfied!" she cried. "Do you know that you are the ideal husband I have so often pictured? I thought Cowboy Charlie was about as near to that ideal as I should ever find, but I see that I was mistaken!"

"Well, I am glad to hear it!" assured Billy.

"And it is so. Nell, you are welcome to Charlie. I don't understand it, yet, but it is plain that the trick I wanted played upon you has been turned upon me. Well, I am not kicking; but it was rather mean."

"Yes, it was a trick, that is true," admitted Billy. "But I had not the ghost of a chance of winning you by any other means, pretty pard."

Her woman's heart was all his in an instant, at that, and she hung affectionately upon his arm. She was, indeed, satisfied to have it as it was.

The couples went in to breakfast, where everything was explained, and merry peals of laughter were heard frequently.

While they were eating, Pony Hen dashed into the room like a fury.

His head was all bandaged up, and he looked like the victim of an explosion, or worse.

He was reaching for a gun as he came, but Billy Watson was upon his feet instantly and had him covered with his own.

"Hold your horses!" he admonished. "We don't want any of your fine shooting around here, my gentleman. Up with your hands, for I have got a little matter of business with you!"

Convinced that he would fare worse if he did not comply, the fellow obeyed.

"You are my prisoner, Richard Sheltten," the detective continued, and the man turned as pale as death. "I have been on your trail a long time, and have found you at last. You are wanted for looting the bank at Beaumont, when you were its cashier, and it seems you invested the spoils in a ranch."

"Who are you?" the fellow gasped.

"Well, I am Billy Watson, popularly known as Detective Billy."

At that the fellow collapsed, and Billy's bride stared at him with her pretty eyes open to their widest.

"Detective Billy!" she gasped, scarcely above a whisper. "The one man of all men I have so often desired to meet and know!"

"Yes," said Watson, drawing her to him, "and you are Detective Billy's pard. I came here to find a criminal, not a wife, but I have found both, it seems. It has been a triple case."

THE END.

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